

TONY FOMISON  
AN ARTIST'S LIFE

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LARA STRONGMAN

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FOMISON IN HIS STUDIO AT WILLIAMSON AVENUE, AUCKLAND, JULY 1989.  
PHOTOGRAPH ROBIN NEATE.

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## *ABSTRACT*

Tony Fomison, New Zealand artist, was born in Christchurch in 1939 and died at Whangarei in 1990. He lived an extreme and frequently eccentric life, during which he produced a substantial body of work in a variety of media.

The intention of this thesis is to examine and interpret Fomison's oeuvre through the chronological framework of his life. An examination of Fomison's personal history provides a context through which to approach his work, which was characterized by idiosyncrasy and the expression of an emotional content drawn from his own experience. Tracing his concern for New Zealand culture from his early days as a student of archeology through to his final years as a spokesperson for multi-cultural issues, this thesis aims to reveal the motivational background to his work, establishing the symbiotic relationship between his life and art.



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## **INTRODUCTION**

I have two problems which interconnect: my art and my life.<sup>1</sup>

Fomison's life and art were inextricably linked. The experiences of his life stimulated and informed his work: his images documented and disseminated his values and uncompromising vision. To make a study of one at the expense of the other is to devalue both.

Fomison was a person of great idiosyncrasy: he was an artist who, in his rejection of the codes of contemporary art-making in favour of the pursuit of a singular vision, can only be regarded as an eccentric. Fomison may thus be related to other maverick practitioners in the European art historical tradition, such as Goya, Pinkham Ryder, and Bacon. It is irrelevant to examine his output in terms of general contemporary artistic theory: the idiosyncratic nature of his work necessitates a similarly idiographic approach. It is appropriate, therefore, to view Fomison's work in the context from which it is formed, that of the single-minded vision of the artist.

There are many precedents for this procedure, which places the history of the artist within the general umbrella of art historical scholarship. In the sixteenth century, Vasari published his *Lives of the Artists*; during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, many biographies of artists have been written which attempt to provide background and socio-historical context to a study of the artist's images. When examining the work of an artist such as Fomison, who was concerned with the expression of emotion in both a personal and a cultural sense, it is efficacious to study the motivational

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<sup>1</sup>Lawrence Durrell, *Balthazar*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p. 204. [first published 1958]

personal and a cultural sense, it is efficacious to study the motivational factors inherent in the production and development of his imagery. Given that Fomison spent his lifetime in the pursuit of individual expression, it would seem pertinent to approach his work through his life, examining the two as a symbiotic whole.

## CHAPTER ONE

# CHRISTCHURCH

## 1939 - 1960

I now felt for the first time the joy of exploration.<sup>1</sup>

ANTHONY LESLIE FOMISON was born on 12 July 1939, as the world prepared for war. He died fifty years, six months and twenty six days later, while massive electrical storms broke over Samoa in the Pacific, his adopted spiritual homeland. The life that came between was no less tumultuous.

FOMISON WAS A sickly child almost from birth, his fierce battle for life mirroring the global conflict into which he was born. He suffered from an inability to ingest food which manifested itself in projectile vomiting most distressing for his parents. Because of this illness (which was probably gastro-oesophagal reflux, untreatable at the time but easily diagnosed and remedied today), Tony Fomison spent the first two and a half years of his life in hospital, returning home only for the odd visit.

Mary Fomison was eighteen when she gave birth to Tony. She had worked as a clerk before her marriage in early 1939; subsequently she was to work as a cleaner in Christchurch Hospital until her retirement. Maurice Fomison, five years older than his wife, was born in Doyleston on 6 October 1915. After leaving school, his initial apprenticeship to an automotive electrician was cancelled after a few months due to the garage proprietor's

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Louis Stevenson, *Treasure Island*, Faber and Faber, 1963

inability to pay him. These were the years of the Depression in New Zealand, and times were hard. Maurice Fomison then found employment as a farm labourer at Cheviot, with periods away at the West Coast working in timber mills. He met Mary during a weekend spent in Christchurch with a group of workmates; after their marriage he transferred to the company's Christchurch timber yard.

Maurice and Mary Fomison visited their young son in hospital regularly, firstly in the Karitane Childrens Hospital and then later in Christchurch Public Hospital. Tony was a patient at the Public Hospital when Maurice's father died, in another ward.

While Tony was in Christchurch Hospital, his father came to see him unexpectedly one day, outside visiting hours. By now Maurice Fomison was working as a 'trammy' - the operator of a single-man tram, taking fares as well as driving. His tram reached its terminus at the hospital, and he had sometime to spare before the return journey. Maurice found his son tied by his limbs to the cot, which appeared to be standard practice except during visiting hours. Maurice and Mary were horrified, and shortly after this incident Tony came home to stay for good.

Many years later, Tony Fomison was to regard his early childhood as an exercise which helped to develop his perceptive faculties:

The only reason I paint and don't write my message is that I spent the first two years of my life in hospital, and I learned to use my eyes. You weren't surrounded by people so you learned to watch. My family say I was a cold person when growing up, but the reason for that is that you buy your observation point with a loss of involvement - it's a price you have to pay.<sup>2</sup>

Two months before Tony's first birthday Mary Fomison became pregnant

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<sup>2</sup>Garth Cartwright, interview with Tony Fomison, 1986.



again, and Tony's sister Julia was born on 13 December 1940. When Maurice Fomison was called up to join New Zealand's second contingent in Italy in 1942, Mary and her two young children moved out of Christchurch to live on a farm near Cheviot with two or three other families, also without husbands and fathers.

Tony Fomison's first art memories dated from the war years at Cheviot. There was little extra money for children's toys in the Fomison household at that stage - the children had to make their own fun, which, when it didn't involve playing in the haybarn or at the forbidden creek, entailed drawing with pencils on scraps of paper under the kitchen table.<sup>3</sup> Mary Fomison wrote to tell her husband how Tony "was always on the floor going scribble, scribble, scribble doing battle scenes of how [his father] would win the war"<sup>4</sup>, and when Maurice returned to New Zealand in 1946, his gift to Tony was a silver inlay paintbox which he had looted from a fallen Staff Headquarters in Italy. There were presents for the rest of the family too: "alabaster mantelpiece things and towels", which Maurice had "paid for in one way if not in another".<sup>5</sup>

The paintbox, which Tony Fomison was to regard as a treasured possession all his life, contained "all the colours you could imagine", including gold and silver. Tony would allow his sister Julia, at that age as keen on painting as he, to use the set now and again - for a small fee. (Tony would also lend Julia money after she had spent her own pocket money. He would fix the rate of interest to be paid on the loan beforehand).

Maurice Fomison, who though in the thick of the fighting in Italy had suffered no more physical injury than a surface shrapnel wound to the leg, went back to his old job driving the tram after he had been demobbed, and

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<sup>3</sup>Information given to the author by Julia Fomison, 1990.

<sup>4</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.

<sup>5</sup>ibid.

the family moved to Tancred Street, in the heart of Linwood. Fomison was aged seven when Maurice returned from the war, and like other children of his era, was forced to deal with the uneasy advent of his father as a comparative stranger within the family circle. Although never particularly close, Maurice Fomison and his son were drawn together by reason of their sex, and, as Tony grew older his father taught him to handle a gun in sessions at the rifle range of the Richmond Working Men's Club.

Tony Fomison remembered his childhood in working class post-war Christchurch as a matter of "always being hungry and skinny and running around barefoot"<sup>6</sup>. However, although there was not a great deal of money to go around, the Fomisons were quite well to do in comparison with other families - Maurice Fomison was in regular employment, and he and Mary had put a deposit on the house in Tancred Street.

In childhood, Tony and Julia attended church regularly, initially with their mother and then later at Sunday school. Mary Fomison was a firm believer in the values and mores of the High Anglican Church: the young Tony, however, was not as certain: "When I went to church I composed cynical songs to the clomps of the fat ladies going up to get their wafers - "F--- this, F--- that, clompedy clompedy clomp."<sup>7</sup>

Later Tony stopped going to church altogether; with the aid of a watch which he had earned raspberry picking in the school holidays, he would walk around the streets for the allotted time, freezing cold in winter but firm in his resolve not to attend church, and arrive back at home just after the end of the service. One day the inevitable happened, the watch ran fast, and he arrived home at an improbably early hour to the recriminations of his parents. However, once the true nature of his feelings regarding church

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<sup>6</sup>Garth Cartwright, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Murray Horton, 'Something Nasty in the Woodshed, *Canta*, February/March 1974, p. 9.

had been brought out into the open, he was not forced to attend against his will.

It was not until many years later that Fomison was to reassess his early experiences of religion, although he never relaxed his cynicism concerning the ways of the Church. He had always felt drawn to the "instinctive respect for ritual" of the Anglican Church, especially enjoying Easter with the season's "marvellous celebration of rebirth and continuity".<sup>8</sup> Some of the most powerful images he ever produced depicted scenes from Christ's Passion; the haunting, far-seeing eyes of the dying Christ, or the majestic, leaden calmness and dull pathos of his **Second Study of Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Dead Christ"** (1971) of the early 'seventies had their genesis in Fomison's unwilling absorption of the litany as a child.

Fomison's childhood rejection of institutionalized religion was an early step along the path of his self-assumed separateness, the deliberate distancing that he was beginning to develop between himself and the world of his parents. Books were one escape route from reality for the solitary: films were another, and clutching his "thruppence" Tony was usually to be found waiting for the doors of the Crystal Palace or the Tivoli to open for the matinee session on a Saturday.<sup>9</sup>

Linwood High School, hastily built to accommodate South Christchurch's post-war baby boom, was still not quite completed by the time that Tony Fomison arrived there in 1952. Although he was obviously intelligent, Fomison's school career was largely undistinguished academically. He performed very badly at various mathematical and scientific subjects, in which he had no interest whatsoever. He made up for this, however, with some proficiency at English, geography and history - in

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<sup>8</sup>Denys Trussell, 'A Provincial Artist Talks of Religious Compassion', *City News*, 17 August 1976.

<sup>9</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

fact, generally gaining higher marks for history than for art. His immersion in books had nurtured an aptitude for language, for the feel and implications of words, something which he had experienced in a three dimensional sense at the Saturday morning Pictures.

As the patterns of what were to be Fomison's adult interests began to crystallise at high school, his isolation from his contemporaries began to grow more profound. Marie Lockey, who at the start of her career taught history to both Julia and Tony at Linwood High, remembers being deeply struck by Fomison's sense of aloneness and withdrawal into the self as an adolescent.<sup>10</sup> A slight, hunched, tense figure, lungs periodically starved of oxygen in crippling asthma attacks, no good at games, uninterested in the teenage hyperbole of his peers, he was increasingly beginning to set himself apart from their society. "Typed as an arty, too unstable for team games, handicapped by being sensitive"<sup>11</sup> - characteristics such as these all too often denote the victim at school, and despite Fomison's fluent facility with language he did not escape the attentions of the resident bullies. Later he stated: "When I was at school I was always getting pummelled..., strung up in a tree, put in a box because I was skinny and wee; ever since then I've fought to survive. I've always had a strong identification with people who get laughed at."<sup>12</sup> As a "non-prefect with thin arms and legs and a great deal of bodily hair of a black and wiry nature",<sup>13</sup> he was subject to a substantial degree of derision from his peers. However, on one memorable day over the summer of 1956-57, Fomison neatly turned the tables on his aggressors. At the army range for an exercise with his comrades in the

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<sup>10</sup>Information given to the author by Marie Lockey, 1990.

<sup>11</sup>Denys Trussell, op.cit.

<sup>12</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>13</sup>A.K. Grant, 'Arms and the Artist', *Listener and TV Times*, 26 March 1990, p. 26.

Linwood High School compulsory Cadet Corps, Fomison performed so successfully with a .303 rifle that he was accorded the ultimate honour of an invitation from the army sergeant to try his luck with a machine gun. Watched by his tormenters among the silent group of cadets, Fomison neatly and economically hit every target presented to him. Oblivious of the impression he had created among the schoolboys, to whom he had established himself as "the finest machine-gunner in the South-west Pacific"<sup>14</sup>, Fomison quietly resumed his place within the uniformed ranks: still an eccentric, but no longer entirely dismissable as weak and incompetent. His future, at this point, was uncertain: although "psychologically addicted to drawing and painting",<sup>15</sup> art was no more than one of a series of interests which set him apart from the norm of his schoolboy society.

Left to his own devices, the overriding interest of his leisure hours was the self-imposed study of history. Possibly the impetus for this was a book about early English history now owned by his sister Julia, at that time part of his parents sparse but eclectic book collection.<sup>16</sup> Fomison pored over its murky black and white reproductions of photographs of Maiden Castle, and explored further in the holdings of the Canterbury Public Library. While Fomison's devotion to the cause of English pre-history for a time approached the near obsessional, it was the discoveries of a summer holiday spent with an uncle at Gore Bay near Cheviot, that were radically to shift the focus of his historical interests and provide an inspiration which would last for the rest of his life.

Overhearing his uncle talking about the nearby Maori 'heaps',

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<sup>14</sup>ibid.

<sup>15</sup>Denys Trussell, *op. cit.*

<sup>16</sup>Information given to the author by Julia Fomison, 1990.

Fomison crossed the river "into country that had not been changed by settlement or roads. All was as it always had been."<sup>17</sup> There he found archeological remains such as shell heaps, ovens and middens. Back in Christchurch, Fomison reinforced his discovery by cycling out to the remains of Maori earthworks at nearby Kaiapoi. His weekends were subsequently taken up by cycling to remote rural spots in search of physical traces of New Zealand's pre-European history. He spent considerable amounts of time at Birdlings Flat near Christchurch, a windswept beach reached through barren and desolate flat land near Lake Ellesmere (Waihora). He wrote later: "Birdlings Flat, that hard, shingly and windy place, I used to bike there, weekends, bookish interests in history on paper at this point taken over by hard and shingly facts."<sup>18</sup>

The attractions of dolmens and menhirs palled completely beside Fomison's awakening search for knowledge of the history of his own country. As a third generation New Zealander, a sense of history and a feeling of 'belonging' in the place were part of Fomison's cultural inheritance as they had not been of his parents. This was especially reinforced for him a couple of years later, when, on one of his periodic lone cycling and camping trips to the wilder parts of Banks Peninsula, he met by chance some of the local Maori people. Fomison's account of this experience is as follows:

When they first found me I was biking twenty miles out of Christchurch. There's these two lakes, Lake Forsythe and Lake Ellesmere, and I was living in a cave which was sacred to the Kai Tahu Maori. And this wavering light was coming towards me across the shingles, so I extinguished my fire and I knew I was living under this sacred cliff called Rae Kura which means Red Forehead. And next to it was this *potaki*, this sacred rock where two of the ancestors of the Kai Tahu had been buried, and here was this joker coming towards me in what turned out to

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<sup>17</sup>Denys Trussell, op. cit.

<sup>18</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison; A Survey*, exhibition catalogue, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1979.

be his father's drapecoat and a shotgun. He'd been staying in this Maori hut eel-fishing and they'd been daring one another to see what this source of light at the base of this cliff was. Well he was the drunkest or stroppiest, and he took me back to where they were living and I told them about my friendship with my grandfather, that I was a throwback, and they said to me, 'From now on you stay here.' And that's when I first started learning. In a way it was from my grandfather. I never would have been accepted if it wasn't for my grandfather.<sup>19</sup>

It appeared that the older people among the Kai Tahu had known Fomison's grandfather, Maurice Fomison's father, well in his trade as a 'slygrogger' around the Lake Ellesmere (Waihora) district, and were able to tell him more about the ancestor with whom he felt such strong links than his own family had been able to do. (Fomison's friendship with his grandfather is largely an apocryphal one, as he died when Fomison was still an infant).

Fomison told this story at various times throughout his life, repeating it for the benefit of friends and later for reporters and historians. One of a series of increasingly bizarre anecdotes which made up his life, his teenage encounter with the Kai Tahu, was, like his other stories, to acquire a significance in retrospect which went towards imposing a structure upon what could otherwise have appeared as a somewhat haphazard and transient existence. Thus the chance encounter between Fomison as a youth and the Kai Tahu of Banks Peninsula became a point to mark in an overall journey; a signifier in a narrative which presupposes purposeful direction from beginning to end. He later stated: "I would say myself that there's no such thing as coincidence. It's a pakeha word for things that are meant to happen."<sup>20</sup>

Drawing from his own beginnings in the pre-television age of

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<sup>19</sup>Garth Cartwright, *op. cit.*

<sup>20</sup>*ibid.*

working class Christchurch, from childhood Saturday morning films and rousing boys' books of adventure, to his later assimilation of the Maori tradition of oral history, Fomison became an accomplished story-teller in his own right; a sophisticated craftsman of both cultural tales and the events of his own life. Looking back from the present vantage point, often with no other 'proof' of a particular past incident than a record of Fomison's own recollections of it, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not events actually occurred as he said they did: for instance, as might seem more probable, that the reality of the situation was that the Kai Tahu simply evicted him as a trespasser and the history of his grandfather's involvement with them was acquired later. What is significant, however, is the welding together of these events in Fomison's own mind, his reinvention of his own life as a continuous thematic narrative. For this reason, the actual 'truth' of Fomison's stories becomes a secondary issue, just as the realistic depiction of a person or object in his paintings is not the point. It is Fomison's interpretation of the facts, as an artist, as a storyteller, which is significant. Which is not to conclude, however, that Fomison's stories were pure fiction, or, indeed, were embellished by any kind of fabrication. It suffices to say that at various times during his life events occurred, which, although lacking confirmation by an impartial observer, were compressed into symbolic significance by Fomison, and were reflected both in his art and in his dealings with others.

Verification of the details of Fomison's encounter with the Kai Tahu in the mid-1950s aside, it is certain that during this period his interest in the physical remnants of Maori culture was growing increasingly strong. A "skinny kid on a bike"<sup>21</sup>, as a fifth-former during school holidays Fomison

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<sup>21</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, op. cit.



came across some local diggers investigating a large cave at Redcliffs near Sumner and offered his services as a labourer. Julius Von Haast, the first director of the Canterbury Museum, had dug two cross trenches in search of *taonga* many years before, but the rest of the cave was untouched. The new diggers found fragile flax sandals and leggings left by Southern Maori, as well as other artefacts dating from moa-hunter culture to that of the whisky-drinking sailors of pre-European settlement. At this point the current director of the Canterbury Museum, Dr. Roger Duff, became involved, and an uneasy alliance developed between the local 'fossickers' and the anthropological establishment.

Back at school, as a senior pupil Fomison came under the tutelage of Les Weenick and Roy Entwistle for art instruction. It was unusual at that time for a school to have more than one teacher for art: the strength of the art department at Linwood High School was to be an important factor in Fomison's eventual decision to study Fine Arts at University. Fomison struck an instant rapport with the two teachers whom he described as a "jocular team". Les Weenick was a large man and the coach of the school First Fifteen; Roy Entwistle was small like Fomison and had a passion for theatre. Fomison benefitted greatly from their left-wing political ideals and easy humour; they also allowed him to "duck and dive the system a bit"<sup>22</sup>, a necessary element for his survival in a school from which he was absenting himself for greater and greater periods of time. He was usually educating himself by studying the contents of a glass case at the Museum, or reading at the Public Library, advancing his own enquiries into Maori culture and New Zealand history.

Something of a crisis developed in Fomison's fifth form year with his parents' assumption that he would leave school and take up a

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<sup>22</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

boilermaker's apprenticeship. In truth, it was not only his parents' expectation - initially it was Fomison's too. He had imagined that he would take up the learning of a trade from which he would eventually qualify with better prospects than had been his father's lot during the Depression, and that although he had "never grown out of mucking around with paint and brushes"<sup>23</sup>, art would merely be a spare time interest. While accepting this as the pattern of his future, Fomison was under no illusion as to what the demands of fulltime employment would mean to his anthropological interests. Probably as a result of this, Fomison decided to take two weeks off from school, studying the old books in the back stacks of the Public Library. (Incidentally, it was at this time that Fomison first made contact with Ron O'Reilly, the City Librarian, later to become a major patron.) The resulting hue and cry and attention focussed on to Fomison's future led Les Weenick to suggest that perhaps Fomison might think about going on to study Fine Arts at the University of Canterbury, with a possible view to teaching. He could come back to school the following year and take the Preliminary examination. After discussion with his parents it was settled, and in 1957 Fomison returned to Linwood High School to complete his sixth form year.

By his own admission, Fomison spent most of that year in the art room, by the end of the year skipping even the English classes which he had previously enjoyed. Although this came to the attention of the school authorities, they do not appear to have been unduly worried; at that time only the Preliminary pass in art was necessary for advancement to university to study Fine Arts, and it was not until later that a University Entrance pass in English also became a prerequisite. Fomison submitted his

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<sup>23</sup>Garth Cartwright, op. cit.

work for, and duly passed, the Preliminary examination at the end of that year. He was about to take the not inconsequential step of becoming the first member of his family ever to attend university.

FOMISON WAS ADMITTED to the Diploma Course in Fine Arts under Clause 2 (ii) of the University of Canterbury's regulations governing Fine Arts; that is, although unmatriculated, he had studied for at least three years in a post-primary school, was at least sixteen years of age, and was able to satisfy the Professorial Board that he had reached an adequate standard in English.

In conjunction with other first year students in 1958, Fomison was required to undertake an initial survey year, during the course of which it was assumed that the student would find his or her own particular forté in which to specialize over the next two years. (The student was able to specialize in one of three areas corresponding to the departments of the art school - painting (the strongest department), sculpture or design.) There were two sections to the first year course; a written paper on the history and theory of art, and practical submissions in each of the following disciplines: Modelling and Casting; Painting from Still Life; Antique and Common Object Drawing; Lettering; and Design in Colour. Although the student could discard his or her weaker subjects the following year in favour of the subject in which he or she was to major, all of the subjects from the First Professional Examination had to be passed to gain entry to the second year.

Fomison successfully completed his first year at the School of Fine Art, but hardly with flying colours. He gained a 'C' pass grade for every practical subject, and 52%, also a 'C' standard, for the History and Theory of Art. The Professorial Board formally approved the standards which he had attained in the disciplines of Elementary Perspective and Geometrical

Drawing, and Fomison was guaranteed a place in the second year and the beginning of the 'specialist' component of his Diploma.

Required at the end of the first year to indicate his course of study for the following two years, Fomison, in the company of a few associates, decided to reject the more popular painting department (in his opinion "mostly the snobbish daughters of graziers treating the place like a finishing school"<sup>24</sup>) in favour of studying Sculpture. Toying increasingly seriously with the idea of becoming an archeologist after completion of his Diploma (the idea of teaching as a career had merely been a red herring to ensure his family's acceptance of his further education), Fomison felt that by studying sculpture he could amplify his responses to Maori carving and art. Discussion with Roger Duff, director of the Canterbury Museum and a keen ethnologist himself, confirmed this as a reasonable idea (Duff even mentioned the possibility of a job in the Museum's Ethnology Department when Fomison had completed his studies<sup>25</sup>), and Fomison announced his intention to study sculpture during his second year at University. The boilermaker's apprenticeship appeared to be fading further and further into the distance.

DURING THE UNIVERSITY terms Fomison lived at home with his family in Tancred Street. He spent his holidays making trips around Canterbury and North Otago recording evidences of Maori rock art for the New Zealand Historic Places Trust.

Much of the fieldwork, located in remote areas of the bush, was carried out in conjunction with Owen Wilkes, who was subsequently to

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<sup>24</sup>Lara Strongman, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup>*ibid.*

become "the leading campaigner against the US military presence in New Zealand"<sup>26</sup>. Fomison later recalled lying in a cave north of Waipara with Wilkes, discussing the recently published *Protest: The Beat Generation and the Angry Young Men*, a collection of essays and short stories by writers such as Jack Kerouac, Alan Ginsberg, Kingsley Amis and Colin Wilson.<sup>27</sup>

A potential setback to the friendship between Fomison and Wilkes came at about this time when Fomison led an expedition to Lewis Pass to examine what he had thought was a Maori war canoe - possibly a little unlikely that far inland, and evidently Wilkes thought so too, conclusively identifying the object as a pig trough from colonial times<sup>28</sup>. Fomison, however, was not offended, and his friendship with Wilkes endured.

In the summer of 1958 Fomison made a trip with the New Zealand Historic Places Trust to North Otago, to help record the rock art sites due to be submerged by the planned artificial Lake Benmore, designed to power a new hydro-electric station. The rock drawings were traced on to large polythene sheets using chinagraph pencils, and after observing the techniques used by the other workers, Fomison suggested the use of medical tape to attach the polythene sheets to the rock face. Adhesion was always a problem, as the rock face was usually cold and damp and the drawings were often on an overhanging surface - Fomison's idea worked well, and soon became established practice among the rock art recorders.<sup>29</sup>

Another trip which Fomison made that year was to Bluecliffs, the Woodhouse family station in South Canterbury. The late Mrs Airini Woodhouse, then chairwoman of the South Canterbury Historical Society,

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<sup>26</sup>Murray Horton, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>27</sup>ibid, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup>ibid, p. 9. (On another occasion, Fomison identified gun emplacements from WW II as ancient Maori earthworks.)

<sup>29</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

had determined that the Maori rock art in the nearby limestone caves should be recorded. Roger Duff suggested that Fomison had the ideal combination of art and archeological backgrounds with which to do so, and took him to Bluecliffs to introduce him to Mrs Woodhouse. There, as on other of his expeditions, Fomison had the choice between sleeping at the "big house" or overnight at the cave. He would often alternate between the two, and on occasion would invite the farm workers with whom he had made friends up to his room for a drinking "session" after work, a fact unknown to the lady of the house.<sup>30</sup>

This exposure to Canterbury's 'Southern Gentry', people of whom he was later to refer as the 'squattocracy', must have been strange for Fomison. Relegated to a room in the servants' wing, his position was very much that of hired help rather than guest of the family, and any socializing was carried out with servants and farm workers. He had no aspirations to join the ranks of the 'gentry', remaining loyal to his working class background with a determined, yet half-amused obstinacy. His inbuilt cynicism and sense of humour saw him through these potentially intimidating circumstances unscathed. He observed with derision the desire of the run-holders to be associated through their family lineage with the important events of New Zealand's (European) past:

The gentry was [sic] down in the big hall next to the hallway with one of these many Captain Cook chests. I never ran into so many Captain Cook chests as when I was staying at those run-holders places. They all seemed to have a Captain Cook chest, or have a relative who had one.<sup>31</sup>

An early introduction to wider society had come with Fomison's association with the Summers family. In the late 1950s, when John

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<sup>30</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>31</sup>*ibid.*

Summers was in charge of Whitcombe and Tombs' second-hand book department, he became aware of "a small, dark, shy-seeming high school boy", who spent a great deal of time in the shop looking through stacks of old Victorian and Edwardian books. Summers turned a blind eye to the books which left the shop concealed under the boy's coat, intrigued by his independence and obvious poverty. When the same books returned with Fomison a week or so later, minus the engravings which had illustrated them, Summers obligingly purchased them back, though well aware of their origin. He was later amused to recall that "thus, by proxy, my firm became the first Fomison patron."<sup>32</sup>

An understanding was struck up between John Summers and Fomison, based upon their mutual interest in history and the arts, and Summers introduced him to his family, with whom Fomison also achieved a strong rapport. He was frequently employed to look after the younger Summers children on evenings when their parents were out. In 1960 Llewelyn and Gwilyn Summers (aged 14 and 13 respectively), accompanied Fomison to the Opihi River to trace Maori rock drawings. They set up camp in two pup-tents under a cabbage tree, near the rock overhang on which Fomison was working. For a fortnight Fomison and the Summers boys lived on very little more than fresh air and the eels which they caught in a nearby stream: Llewelyn Summers also recalls raids for sheep turnips in a farmer's field (discovered by the farmer and hastily blamed by Fomison on the two boys), and Fomison's technique of reviving stale bread by soaking handfuls in the stream, and later toasting it on an open fire for the main meal of the day.<sup>33</sup> There is a photograph of Fomison with the children from about this time, dressed in a black 'first

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<sup>32</sup>John Summers, 'Narcissus... Universal and Loved', *Preview*, Canterbury Society of Arts, May/June 1990.

<sup>33</sup>Information given to the author by Llewelyn Summers, 1989.

mate' jacket, dark jeans and heavy boots - his hands in his pockets, one leg crossed nonchalantly over the other, he stares at an oblique angle away from the camera with a broad grin on his face, looking relaxed and at ease. Fomison later recalled that it was this summer at the Opihi River that marked the point at which he "started to become a New Zealander".<sup>34</sup>

WHILE HIS HOLIDAYS were spent happily and productively camped in wild parts of the South Island, living from the land and recording its living history, by comparison Fomison's time at art school was much less productive and more frustrating.

The initial difficulties for Fomison had come in his first year at art school, in the painting classes taught by Jack Knight. Armed with regulation paintbox and the prescribed tubes of paint purchased from the school shop, Fomison attempted to tackle the still life or landscape under Knight's direction, with a conspicuous lack of success:

The composition you could work out first, you drew it in charcoal, that took care of that. And you fill it in with light and all this colour and all this hue. Oh... it was all a hue and cry for me... He'd criticise the colour so you'd muck round and by the time I'd got the colour the edges had come off...<sup>35</sup>

Further disillusionment with painting came in other classes, and probably accounted in no small part for Fomison's switch to sculpture in the second year, archeological purposes aside:

The trouble with oil painting I soon found out was that when you added black and white to make the things in your picture round, the colour became muddy and when you added colour again the edges went flat. My paintings didn't impress

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<sup>34</sup>Murray Horton, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>35</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, op. cit.



the lecturer, but if that was oil painting I wasn't impressed either.<sup>36</sup>

'Antique and Common Object Drawing', in which the student had to draw from plaster reproductions of disembodied pieces of classical statuary, presented similar problems of modelling form to Fomison:

I still believe it's impossible to draw plaster casts. They're chalky white, they're chalky white. They have nothing of the luminosity of marble...they're impossible to get a depth of tone with.<sup>37</sup>

Fomison's treatment of the 'plaster casts', though awkward, continued the careful documentary drawing style which he had evolved for the recording of artefacts in his archeological work. He drew on a small scale, attempting faithfully to reproduce the forms before him.

Life drawing classes in the second year, however, did not facilitate this approach:

My drawing got mucked up in the life classes where you often had quite a short spell and quite a big piece of paper... and you couldn't just draw in one corner... I'd drag the drawing around the edge of the outline of the unfortunate model who was sitting there. Oh, it was hopeless.<sup>38</sup>

In a fit of temper one day, Fomison tired of his careful style, and "attacked the drawing with a piece of charcoal", gaining from this experience "a terrific feeling of release".<sup>39</sup> He produced a large, expressionistic treatment of the subject before him, which, once seen by his tutors Dick Lovell-Smith and Rudolf Gopas, was strongly encouraged by

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<sup>36</sup>Murray Horton, op. cit., p. 9.

<sup>37</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, op. cit.

<sup>38</sup>ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Murray Horton, op. cit., p. 9.

them. Michael Dunn later recalled observing Fomison at work on the studies in the art school studio:

I remember... seeing Fomison come in to a life class with big sheets of white paper and place them roughly over a desk. They were so large that the lower areas of the paper would be on the floor while the artist was working quickly and intently on the upper parts of his drawing. Once the spectacle was had of Fomison standing on the completed part of the drawing while feverishly finishing the other sections.<sup>40</sup>

Fomison continued to produce large pencil and charcoal drawings in this vein for several years, spurred on, no doubt, by the initial enthusiasm of his lecturers which was compounded by the later attention paid to the works by members of the local art community after he had left art school. Later, however, he was to refer to this expressionistic catharsis as having irrevocably "mucked up"<sup>41</sup> his drawing.

The drawings which Fomison produced at this time were conceived from a sculptural sense of mass and weight in form. Although he graduated from Canterbury with a Diploma in Sculpture (and enjoyed the time he spent in and out of art school with sculpture lecturers E.J. Doudney and Tom Taylor), it was drawing which constituted the major achievement of his three years at Art School. A certain facility with carving had helped him with the requirements of the sculpture course, but in terms of grades he was an average student from start to finish, never once deviating for any subject at every level from the 'C' pass which he had gained for his first year efforts. He applied for admission to the Honours course, but was not particularly surprised when he was turned down, later apostrophizing the work which he had produced at this time as "completely undistinguished

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<sup>40</sup>Michael Dunn, 'Tony Fomison: A Consideration', *Artis*, New Vision Gallery, Auckland, vol. 2, no. 2, April 1972, pp. 11-12.

<sup>41</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, op. cit.

and derivative".<sup>42</sup>

Later he stated:

Initially I thought my working-class background was an inhibition. I thought that I didn't have enough education. What made me change my mind about this was that, in spite of my upbringing, education could only inform my journey. It couldn't make me make it. Life was a journey, and my working-class prejudice not to defer to the specialist, made me realise that the journey would be undertaken, scholarly help offering or not.<sup>43</sup>

Fomison left art school in late spring 1960 with a box of barely-used paints, a pile of 'lost-temper' drawings, sundry carvings in stone and wood, an incidental knowledge of Maori rock art, a strong feeling regarding the inadequacies of the school's teaching methods, and a lesser one regarding his own inadequacies as an artist. He was twenty-one years old, and though uncertain of his overall future direction, knew that he would be treading his own path henceforth.

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<sup>42</sup>ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Denys Trussell, *op. cit.*

## CHAPTER TWO

*CHRISTCHURCH*  
*1960-1964*

FOMISON SPENT THE summer after leaving Art School in a state of profound aestivation, withdrawing prickily into himself like a hermit crab into the shell. It was a long, hot summer in Christchurch that year<sup>1</sup>, like the airless, endless days of childhood memory; bitumen erupting in dark sticky pockmarks in Linwood's quiet streets; the north-west arc of clouds over the city; swallowed snatches of children's voices piercing through the windows of the bedroom where Fomison lay, dull with torpor, subjecting his family to the ravages of a "queer adolescent phase"<sup>2</sup> which had seized him on completion of his studies.

The old wooden house had filled with children, born after Mr Fomison's return from Italy with the New Zealand contingent. His absence during the War meant that the Fomison offspring were grouped in almost two separate families: Tony and Julia, the eldest and close in age; followed by Janet, born in 1951; Anna, born in 1954; and Michael in 1957, 18 years after his older brother. Fomison's taciturnity and apparent lack of earning capacity placed a damper on his relationship with his parents at this time: he was a hero to his younger siblings, however, a congenial outlaw on an old army Indian motorcycle, an informative companion who combined the scholarly learning of the academic with the lore of the

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<sup>1</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.

<sup>2</sup>ibid.

bush.

He left home towards the end of summer, and moved into a cheap flat in an old weatherboard house at 22 Armagh Street. He was eminently satisfied with the change in his surroundings, which he described in a letter to Julia, who had moved to Auckland to study occupational therapy:

My present flat consists of 3 consecutive [sic] rooms... The central one has the door to outside; it is the size of my old bedroom & I have made it my bedroom/living room. On one side is the smaller, kitchinitte [sic], & on the other the largest room in the flat, & this is my studio. Colours are contemporary... on the white walls I have hung tracings of my rock drawings; on yellow walls, bright paintings by the kids; & on the grey walls, my own drawings.<sup>3</sup>

The Armagh Street flat had traditionally housed fine art students, and most of the tenants at the time of Fomison's occupation were attending the Art School. He described the place as "real mad", and obviously enjoyed living there, writing to Julia that he hoped shortly to move to another flat upstairs "with the ceilings sloping with the eaves - a real attic!"<sup>4</sup> The idea of the lone artist working in poverty in a garret seems to have crossed his mind as an image worthy of cultivation.

In actual fact, Fomison's stay at Armagh Street was not long - he was evicted after a disagreement with the landlord over an alleged 'fiddling' of the gas meters<sup>5</sup> - but it was significant due to the fact that it was there that he took up painting again. Approaching the canvas or board with the brush much as he had 'attacked' paper with charcoal to produce his new drawing style at Art School, Fomison produced a series of brushy, expressionistic 'lost temper' paintings.

Although he had left Art School, Fomison re-enrolled extramurally to

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<sup>3</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison [early 1961]

<sup>4</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>5</sup>Murray Horton, 'Something Nasty in the Woodshed', *Canta*, February/March, 1974, p. 9

learn lithography and lino cutting, and submitted some of his new paintings to the Art School Sketch Club. The critic invited to view the works that year was Fomison's 'first patron' John Summers, who was favourably impressed by Fomison's new venture into painting. When, with friends from the art school, Fomison submitted these new paintings to the Canterbury Society of Arts (CSA) for assessment, he had three paintings accepted for the Autumn exhibition of April 1961<sup>6</sup>, and was accepted as a 'working member' of the Society (which entitled him to exhibit in the Society's annual group shows, and to hold one-person exhibitions in the Society's rooms at Durham Street).

He continued his association with the art school through his friendship with Rudolf Gopas, who had been appointed to a lectureship in the painting department in 1959. Their relationship was frequently one of mutual antagonism, their heated discussions lasting long into the night.<sup>7</sup> Fomison found Gopas's dogmatic and vehemently expressed views on the nature of the artist's life stimulating: Gopas's message was that "nothing should be allowed to interfere with the act of making art."<sup>8</sup>

At this time Fomison was working as a part-time assistant to a landscape gardener, laying and maintaining lawns and gardens for factories and wealthy private homes. The firm had two categories of client - "people who'd moved into old houses at the top of the hill and wanted trees removed, and people who'd moved into new houses on the flat and wanted trees put in."<sup>9</sup> Working two or three days a week in the open air and earning just enough to live on, Fomison spent the rest of his time

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<sup>6</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison [early 1961]

<sup>7</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

<sup>8</sup>John Coley, introduction to *Rudolf Gopas*, ed. Jim and Mary Barr, Govett-Brewster Art Gallery / Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, New Plymouth, 1982.

<sup>9</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p. 9.

painting, and socialising with friends ("there was no beatnik scene except for a whole lot of alcoholics out at Sumner. We used to rave about Zen Buddhism and drink ourselves stupid."<sup>10</sup>) The question of the ethnology position at the Museum arose again, but Fomison arranged with Roger Duff for the job to be postponed for a year so that he could concentrate on his painting.<sup>11</sup>

Apart from the three paintings which had been included in the CSA's 'Open Exhibition', Fomison's first show of paintings was held in November 1961 at the Society's Durham Street Art Gallery. In conjunction with fellow graduates from the Art School - Pam Cotton, Julian Royds and John Gillespie, and Murray Grimsdale who was still completing his Diploma - Fomison exhibited a number of his recent drawings and oils. The exhibition, described by Fomison in a contemporary newspaper article as "representative of all the 'isms'"<sup>12</sup>, had no cohesive thematic identity apart from the fact that all five described themselves as "figurative painters - most of us feel that abstract is rather a dead end." Fomison rejected any thoughts of the five becoming a regular 'group' of painters, but admitted that they considered themselves to be potentially serious artists, unlikely to become teachers or end up as 'weekend' painters.<sup>13</sup>

A review in *The Press* described the exhibition as "interesting", and categorised Pam Cotton and Fomison "loosely as expressionists". Of Fomison's contribution, the reviewer wrote:

...Mr Fomison works almost exclusively from the human figure, though the mood of his paintings is more suggestive of landscape. His paintings are big and bold, but they do not always hold the attention because of their simplicity. Some of

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<sup>10</sup>*ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>11</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup>*The Star*, 8 November 1961, p.12.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.*

them are rather like enlargements of his little pen drawings. However, at his best ('Naked Woman' and 'Mulgan's "Man Alone"'), there is sufficient detail to interact with the thrusting power of the main rhythms.<sup>14</sup>

It appeared that once again, as at Art School, Fomison was battling problems of scale, particularly the transformation of an image conceived on a small scale to its execution in a larger format. Nevertheless, the exhibition was well received by members of the Art Society, and several works were sold. At around this time, Fomison also sold another painting, *Man with Folded Arms* [Fig. 3], to 'a beneficiary of the Hocken Library and Gallery'.<sup>15</sup> This work typifies Fomison's loosely worked, 'brushy' style of these early years. The background is a cacophony of thick brushstrokes, while the figure is worked in thick dark impasto outline reminiscent of the works of Roualt (a strong influence on Rudolf Gopas's painting, which Fomison may have assimilated through his association with the lecturer), its highlights revealing the light ground beneath. The painting depicts an unidentified male figure, truncated at the neck and knees by the frame. Its arms are crossed over its chest in a gesture of self-containment and protection, forming an 'x' shaped cross which seems to deny the viewer entry into the work, forming a barrier between the subject and the gaze.

Early in the following year, Fomison bought a sportscoat and "replaced the string in his shoes with laces"<sup>16</sup> for his interview with the Canterbury Museum Trust. He was given the job of Assistant Ethnologist, a position later described somewhat cynically by him as "the climax of my archeological career". He requested that the job be part-time so that he could continue painting, which was agreed to by his employer. By mutual

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<sup>14</sup>JNK, 'Five Young Painters', *The Press*, 15 November 1961.

<sup>15</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison (late 1961)

<sup>16</sup>Murray Horton, *op cit.*, p. 9.



consensus between Fomison and Dr Duff, the position was initially to be for one year's tenure, after which time it would be reviewed by both parties.

Fomison had his own office in the Museum and combined extensive outside fieldwork with in-house duties. He produced a great deal of research into Maori rock art, and worked towards a theory of the 'style sequence' of the evolution of this art form, based on his observation of specific site examples and dating of the archeological detritus found nearby. Another achievement of this year was the research for and writing of a short monograph on South Island rock drawing to form the catalogue essay to an exhibition from the Museum's collection. Fomison produced a thoughtful and scholarly text to accompany the painted copies of rock drawings which were exhibited. These copies, generally 1/3 to 1/4 of actual size, had been made by Theo Schoon in 1946-47 for the Department of Internal Affairs.

Schoon, also an artist, came in for a great deal of criticism in later years for his practice of retouching the rock drawings in an attempt to restore them to what he guessed was their original state. It appeared that he was unable to repress the artistic motivations inherent in his study of Maori rock art in favour of straightforward archeological documentation. However, Schoon was the first to promulgate a view of the rock drawings as fine examples of Maori art, signifiers of sophisticated cultural achievement rather than the "idle scribbles of nomadic Maori tribesmen sheltering from the rain",<sup>17</sup> which had hitherto been the case. This was a standard which Fomison picked up fifteen years later, although, unlike Schoon, he was able to accept the artistic worth of the drawings in their current form, as fragmentary signs and clues to New Zealand's past.

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<sup>17</sup>Neil Roberts, *Maori Rock Drawing and Theo Schoon*, exhibition catalogue, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch, n.d.

The artist Gordon Walters, twenty years older than Fomison, also made a study of Maori rock art in his youth, and spent time with Schoon in the 1940s documenting the drawings in the caves of the South Island.<sup>18</sup> Whereas the influence of the rock drawing on Fomison's work at the time of his own study was negligible in visual terms (confining itself to a general interest in New Zealand's cultural history, to the relationship between the land and the art it produces, and perhaps towards the simplification of form), Walters abstracted his knowledge of Maori rock art in terms of the primitivism which he admired in the work of modernist European painters such as Paul Klee and Joan Miro. For Walters, Maori rock art assumed the position of a storehouse of primitivist values pertinent to New Zealand which provided the impetus for a local version of modernist abstraction. In the work of both Walters and Schoon, the Maori rock drawings provided a basis for stylization: Fomison, uninterested in contemporary modernism and even less in non-figural abstraction, viewed the drawings in terms of visual references to the country's living history.

In March of 1962 a drawing by Fomison was reproduced in *Landfall*, the quarterly literary journal. Entitled **Seated Figure**, this is a life study in charcoal of a statuesque naked woman. Somewhat awkwardly realized, the drawing is interesting for its early demonstration of conventions of figure drawing later adopted by Fomison. The model's powerful thighs tail off into nothingness at mid-calf, and heavy, rounded arms are not completed by formed hands; the head is small in proportion to the body, set on a long neck and hunched awkwardly forward as if uneasy with supporting its own weight. If this is compared with a later work such as **The Fugitive** (1980-82) [Fig. 27], the same 'primitivist' conventions are

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<sup>18</sup>Michael Dunn, 'Walters and Primitivism in the 1940s', in *Gordon Walters: Order and Intuition*, ed. James Ross and Laurence Simmonds, Walter Publication/ Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand, 1989, pp. 42 - 50.

apparent; powerful limbs and haunches taper into tiny points, while the head, thrust forward by the curve of the spine, appears simultaneously too small for the body and too heavy for it to support.

The *Landfall* drawing is in style not generally characteristic of work produced by Fomison from around this time. Very much an academic 'study' rather than a fully realized 'work', the figure is outlined within the confines of the paper, blank space around it. Other paintings and drawings from this time fill the entire sheet of paper, riotous strokes of thick brushwork bringing the image to the very edge of the page without reaching what would be its own outline. It was works of this type which Fomison produced for his first one-person exhibition at the Several Arts Gallery in December 1962. The exhibition consisted mainly of monotypes, although a recent series of landscapes in oils were also included.

The monotype process, whereby the image is produced by painting or drawing with oil paint or ink on a flat surface such as a copper plate or large piece of glass, paper then being placed on top of the design and the unique print made by pressure on the back of the paper, particularly appealed to Fomison, and he made "some 30 or 40"<sup>19</sup> of these prints for the exhibition. Perhaps it was the combination of drawing and painting involved with this process, added to the fact that any mistakes were easily rectifiable before the print was made, which recommended monotypes to Fomison; the process certainly suited his undisciplined, sprawling, brushy style with its lack of tonal modelling. The crudely modelled effects which were present were formed in terms of 'highlights' where the hogs-hair brush had partially removed wet paint from the glass, describing light on cheeks or foreheads of the subjects. *Girl's Head* [Fig. 4] and *Sad Maori* [Fig. 5] are characteristic examples of his monotypes, borrowing from both the

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<sup>19</sup>*The Press*, 14 December 1962.

sculptural approach to form and the hasty expressionism which he had learned at art school.

Fomison's Several Arts exhibition coincided with an exhibition of recent work by M.T. Woollaston on display at the Society of Arts' Gallery in Durham Street. Woollaston visited the Several Arts Gallery and spent considerable time talking to Fomison. The conversation resulted in Woollaston asking Nelson Kenny (JNK), the art reviewer of *The Press*, for permission to write the review of Fomison's work himself. Kenny agreed, and Fomison found Woollaston's critique "very encouraging".<sup>20</sup>

The subject matter of the monotypes was predominantly 'heads', both European and Maori, including a series of old women and another of youthful models. Woollaston, reviewing the exhibition for *The Press*, was particularly impressed by the power of the Maori subjects, "the broad, dim lights" of which "glimmered swarthily out of this ancient darkness", remarking on their "oceanic feel" and commenting that "they are plainly imbued with the artist's love of Maori art itself - a very different thing from any mere attempt to imitate it". While admiring the "humanistic line" of the studies of youthful models ("very strong and free and tenderly sensitive all at once"), Woollaston was not so impressed with the few 'direct oil' landscapes, commenting that "It seems as though, for the present, monotype is Mr Fomison's appropriate medium; his oils do not seem to do quite what he wants them to do."<sup>21</sup>

It was not the first time that M.T. Woollaston and Fomison had met. Woollaston had been invited by the Art Society to officially open the exhibition by 'Five Young Painters' the year before, and had commented publicly on the "amazing individuality"<sup>22</sup> of the works on display. After the exhibition, Woollaston had invited Fomison to stay with him for a

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<sup>20</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, op. cit.

<sup>21</sup>*The Press*, 14 December 1962.

<sup>22</sup>*The Star*, 15 November 1961, p.26

few days at his house at Greymouth, on the West Coast, and just before he began the job at the Museum, Fomison had hitch-hiked through Arthur's Pass to see Woollaston, writing to Julia that "you will remember, perhaps, that he and Colin McCahon are considered as our 2 foremost serious painters."<sup>23</sup>

At this time (1960-62), Woollaston was working on his 'Erua' series, the portraits in ink and wash and pencil of a Maori boy, Erua Brown. Having painted landscapes consistently for some years, the 'Erua Sketchbook' marked the re-energizing of a significant aspect of Woollaston's work, the figurative subject, which may in some part account for the enthusiasm with which he viewed Fomison's monotypes. Fomison himself would no doubt have seen Woollaston's earlier exhibition at the Durham Street Art Gallery in June 1961, six months before the 'Five Young Painters' show, and perhaps admired Woollaston's own 'brushiness' and feeling for the landscape. The influence is possibly not only one-sided: Woollaston's portrait head in ink and wash of Harry Tainui (1963), with its dark tones and bold highlights filling almost the entire ground of the paper, is reminiscent of Fomison's monotypes, while Woollaston's painting of **Westland Township** from the same year utilizes the technique of removal of paint with a hogs-hair brush in a wild cacophony of brushstrokes.

Shortly after the close of Fomison's exhibition at Several Arts, the year's tenure at the Museum fell due for review, and it was decided by both Fomison and Roger Duff that it would be mutually advantageous for it not to be renewed.<sup>24</sup> Buoyed by the critical and practical success of the Several Arts Exhibition (once again, several works were sold), Fomison decided to drop all his archeological interests and devote himself purely to art. In early 1963 he moved into an empty bach in Church Bay, opposite

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<sup>23</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison, [1961]

<sup>24</sup>Lara Strongman, *op. cit.*

Lyttelton, cancelling any commitments (such as a WEA course on Primitive Art) which would bring him in to town. He continued with his work in oil, monotype, and charcoal, producing further series of 'heads' and other landscape studies. Among the works he produced at this time were **Night and Day** (1963)<sup>25</sup>, a monotype triptych in which a long-necked skull is superimposed over rolling contours of hills, probably his first attempt at introducing an anthropomorphic element to his depiction of the New Zealand landscape, and **Takaumu** (1963) [Fig. 6], a large, dark charcoal drawing of a Polynesian head.

Fomison described his new accommodation as "quite terrific" in a letter to Julia (written on notepaper abstracted from the Canterbury Museum). He wrote:

The living room, with table, bed, and the sort of stove in one corner that you see people around in pictures of American country stores; the kitchen with sink, fridge, but with coal range and large table; the third room, a bunk room, is curtained off... Outside, a good view of Lyttelton Harbour and port, improving if one takes the trouble to climb further up the hill... all around, pine tree groups in hollows for firewood. A steep bushed gully with waterfall & cave used by the Maoris, on one side; further down across the road the valley descends into Church Bay.<sup>26</sup>

A sense of 'home' was important to Fomison throughout his life. He actively sought and created a series of ordered bases from which to lead his disorderly existence: even when reduced to circumstances of the most abject poverty, his possessions were precisely arranged to maintain his accommodation as a calm retreat from the outside world. Enjoying the

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<sup>25</sup>Fomison may have been inspired to give this work this title, strongly reminiscent of Colin McCahon's **Takaka: Night and Day** (1948), after seeing the McCahon exhibition which had travelled to the Canterbury Society of Arts Gallery in 1962. The monoprint also bears close compositional similarity to McCahon's **Six Days in Nelson and Canterbury** (1950).

<sup>26</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison, [1963]

natural features of his immediate environment, he moulded its artificial trappings to project a sense of aesthetic dignity in function. He stayed at the bach in Church Bay, one of the earliest of the solitary homes of his adult life, for several months over the summer and autumn of 1963, buying groceries from the little country store and foraging from the land. Leading this reclusive life, he painted continuously, only occasionally hitch-hiking into Christchurch around the bays of Lyttelton Harbour.

On one trip into the city, he spent the evening with a group of older, established artists at the house of Ron O'Reilly. O'Reilly was the City Librarian, and had taken an interest in Fomison's work from the beginning, by this time owning several works which he had purchased both privately and from the two exhibitions, including the **Night and Day** monotype triptych. Fomison wrote of O'Reilly: " [He] has constantly helped me by buying my work and is probably entitled to consider himself my 'patron'."<sup>27</sup> O'Reilly knew Colin McCahon well, and had recently opened an exhibition of his work in Auckland. When McCahon visited Christchurch in 1963, O'Reilly arranged a supper for him, inviting Toss Woollaston, Leo Bensemann, Doris Lusk, and Fomison.<sup>28</sup>

Fomison may perhaps have already been familiar with McCahon's work from his exhibition at the Durham Street Art Gallery in September of the previous year 'The Gate series and other recent paintings.' (Fomison's friend from Art School, Julian Royds, had also shared the Hay's Art Prize with McCahon and F.L.Jones in August 1960.) Fomison was very enthusiastic about meeting McCahon, one of "our foremost serious painters",<sup>29</sup> and maintained the relationship when he arrived in Auckland ten years later.

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<sup>27</sup>ibid

<sup>28</sup>ibid

<sup>29</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison [1963]

Ron O'Reilly had intimated to Fomison that the Ikon Gallery in Auckland, where McCahon had exhibited for the last two years, had showed an interest in presenting an exhibition of his work at some time in the future. Fomison was cautiously interested, asking Julia who was still living in Auckland "to keep an ear open and get some idea of their reputation and business methods." He was working towards a show scheduled for September 1963 at the Durham Street Art Gallery, but thought that perhaps he could show at the Ikon later that year or in early 1964.

Fomison's solo exhibition at the Art Society's gallery was a great success. Once again, he exhibited a large number of works, largely monochromatic figurative studies in charcoal, oils and monotype prints. Ron O'Reilly (signing himself 'O.R.') reviewed the show for the Christchurch Press, describing the works as "thoughtful, perceptive, well-composed; civilized as well as strong", commenting that Fomison's "knowledge of Maori art informs his own work. It conveys a sense of deep natural forces capable of destruction, capable also of sustaining and nourishing life and human dignity."

O'Reilly found Fomison himself as worthy of description as his works:

A young man who gives no thought most of the time to his personal appearance, and seems at one with his untidy looking creations. He turns out to be a gentle and unassuming, well-spoken friendly young man, gentle and responsive to those about him, who impresses with his quiet, lucid discussions of serious things and his good humoured appreciation of the comic.<sup>30</sup>

It is difficult to know what Fomison would have made of this, but it is certain that he was delighted with the opening of the exhibition, which, fortified by "plenty of drink" lasted until midnight, and resulted in sales of over a third of his work.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>*The Star*, 18 September 1963.



Many of the works were sold to members of The Group and its wider circle. The Group were a changing band of Christchurch painters who exhibited together annually at the Art Society's Gallery in Durham Street. Over a history of several decades, The Group became known for their progressiveness and for the seriousness with which they viewed their art: the informal organization included such luminaries as McCahon, Doris Lusk, Leo Bensemann, Olivia Spencer Bower, and W.A. Sutton. Encouraged by Ron O'Reilly, members of The Group took an interest in Fomison's work, and he was invited to exhibit with them as a guest in 1963.

In mid-1963, Fomison moved from the bach at Church Bay to a rabbitier's hut in Kaikoura<sup>32</sup>. He knew Kaikoura well, having spent some time there during art school holidays with archeological parties organized by Roger Duff, and in 1959 had carried out a site survey of the Kaikoura Peninsula.<sup>33</sup> His initial motivation to return there in 1963 was to record the findings of the current archeological excavation at South Bay, a job of a few days: he decided, however, to remain in Kaikoura to paint in solitude, once again following the example of Gopas, who had spent time painting in the district in the mid-fifties.

Once again, he described his delight in his new accommodation in a letter to his sister:

My hut is cosy, one-roomed but not too small, with a wash house next to it, & a spare shed I'm using as a studio.... Have my own delivery box with name (-Esq.) into which the paper boy, who passes me on his way home, obligingly throws a spare paper. Very quiet here: Town cemetery on one side, Town rubbish dump on the other.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>31</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison [1963]

<sup>32</sup>The rabbitiers' hut was taken over by M.T. Woollaston after Fomison's departure.

<sup>33</sup>Tony Fomison, 'Site Survey of the Kaikoura Peninsula', *New Zealand Archeological Association Newsletter* (Canterbury issue), vol. 3, no. 1, December 1959.

Fomison spent his time in Kaikoura painting furiously in the rabbitier's hut. He occasionally assisted a fisherman in South Bay in exchange for crayfish and paua, which he cooked for himself or bartered for vegetables with nearby landowners. Buoyed and inflated by the success of his shows in Christchurch and the interest taken in his work by the artistic establishment, he gained a confidence which manifested itself in an adherence to the romantic ideals of the traditional artist figure. He consciously cultivated an eccentricity of appearance and behaviour, growing his hair long and living in solitude - his only company the cows and rabbits in the nearby paddocks and the Fats Domino records which he played incessantly at top volume. Obsessed, eccentric, frequently hungry, he conformed to the popular romantic ideal of the lifestyle of an artist. The reality, however, was somewhat different, as he ruefully later admitted:

I was too young for solitude. That sort of desert kick you've got to leave until you're a lot older. It was ridiculous. I'd go to Christchurch at any excuse. I'd dropped all archeology and devoted myself to painting. I was an obstreperous young painter who thought everyone else was shit. I'm sure I was becoming unbearable... I thought I was the cat's pyjamas, God's gift to painting. Insufferable.<sup>35</sup>

Fomison did not go unnoticed in Kaikoura, especially after a small exhibition he held in the town's centre (a letter to the local paper complained about his "indistinct portraits of malformed negroes pictured at midnight<sup>36</sup>). He was invited to spend an afternoon at the house of the local landowner, Ms. Cora Wilding. On the afternoon of Fomison's visit,

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<sup>34</sup>Undated letter to Julia Fomison [1963]

<sup>35</sup>Murray Horton, *op.cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup>*ibid*, p. 11.

Ms. Wilding had a house-guest from Nelson staying with her for a few days - Mrs Thelma Clairmont and her high school-aged son, Philip. Following afternoon tea, Fomison and Philip Clairmont were dispatched to play tennis together on the overgrown court. They soon realized that neither was particularly interested in playing the game, and spent some time talking together instead. A few days later Mrs Clairmont and Philip returned the visit, and Fomison showed them his recent paintings in the rabbitier's hut/studio.<sup>37</sup>

This early meeting with Fomison must have been a formative experience for the young Philip Clairmont, who even at this stage was showing signs of a prodigious talent for art. Fomison's appearance, his lifestyle, his belief in his work (which last had been further reinforced by the acceptance of an oil painting entitled **Then the earth shook and trembled; the foundations of the Hills also moved and were shaken, because he was wroth. 18th Psalm** into the Paris Biennale for 1963) must have been a significant factor in Clairmont's own subsequent adoption of the role of one of the 'wild men' of New Zealand art, an expressionist whose wild and frenzied brushwork indicated a lifestyle to match.

In late 1963, Fomison received notification that his application for a New Zealand Arts Advisory Council travel grant to spend a year overseas had been accepted. He had applied for over £600 to spend six months each in London and Paris to study the public collections. Friends and acquaintances from the art school had also been successful, but largely under different criteria than those applied to the Fomison's grant. Other students were given awards to continue with supervised post-graduate study at various Colleges of Art in the United Kingdom, whereas Fomison was to be independent. It appears that the Arts Advisory Council (of which the artist W.A. Sutton, a strong force in The Group, was a member),

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<sup>37</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

impressed by Fomison's growing reputation rather than by his mediocre art school attainments, recognized that his development as an artist would not be encouraged by the routine of academia, and trusted that he would be sufficiently self-motivated to pursue his own course of study.

Fomison packed his few possessions and many paintings and prepared to leave for Christchurch. The boat for England sailed from Auckland, and he arranged to stay there with Julia and her new husband before he left. He had achieved confirmation of his status as a young artist of both merit and promise on both a regional and a national scale; he was impatient to experience the larger scale of life overseas. He nevertheless felt more than a little uneasy about leaving New Zealand. He commented:

Suddenly I was having to say goodbye to it all, the two small huts next to some lonely pine trees that swayed over them all night, and this terrific view right up the plain to the foothills of Mt Fyffe. You know how big Canterbury is, you can stand in one part and not be able to see another. Well, you can stand on the Kaikoura Peninsula and see the plains going this way and that way up to the hilly coast at either end and the hills coming right back up to Mt Fyffe. A miniature Canterbury only much more lush and tangible. Suddenly it was to end and I was to leave it in a strange frame of mind.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison - A Survey*, exhibition catalogue, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1979, n.p.

## CHAPTER THREE

*EUROPE*  
*1964 - 1967*

Let's have one other gaudy night: Call to me  
All my sad captains; fill our bowls once more;  
Let's mock the midnight bell.<sup>1</sup>

EARLY IN 1964 Fomison set sail from Auckland Harbour for Europe in search of adventure and artistic stimulation. As it happened, however, the voyage became an adventure in itself, an experience which informed aspects of his work for the rest of his life.

On board the Sitmar Line's *Castel Felice* (known to its English-speaking passengers as the 'Castle of Fleas'), Fomison left New Zealand in the company of a number of returning English immigrants whom he described as "professional groaners of the worst type"<sup>2</sup>. More passengers were collected at ports of call in Australia, and Fomison suffered greatly by their proximity for six weeks in the cramped conditions of the economy class section of the ship. Recalling this time years later, he stated: "I hated those days...The compulsory confinement with a whole lot of people in your cabin and in the corridors and at your table and all the bars around the place... ah! I hated it..."<sup>3</sup>

Avoiding the "ghastly round of bingo, deck sports, dances and third-rate

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<sup>1</sup>William Shakespeare, *Anthony and Cleopatra*, III, xi, 182.

<sup>2</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.

<sup>3</sup>*ibid.*

films"<sup>4</sup> which constituted life on board the *Castel Felice*, Fomison spent his time reading, writing long letters to his family in New Zealand, and drinking in one of the ship's many bars. He wrote gleefully to his brother-in-law Peter Feran, Julia's husband, that: "There's nothing but bars on this boat... the Verandah Bar, the Bavarian Bar, the Lido Bar, the Cocktail Bar... Stout, lager, bitter sells for 1/6 tin - probably cheap by shore standards, but by the time you've done a pub crawl it certainly mounts up."<sup>5</sup>

The noise on board the ship was intense and incessant, and must have been exhausting for Fomison who had spent the last year living in solitude. Evenings were spent trying to dodge the jovial 'singalongs' in the bars:

...the other night we had a large table of Germans shouting beerhall songs to an accordion at one end of the Bavarian Bar; a 'Kingston' trio group of Yanks with guitar two tables along; some old Cockney men and women singing 'My Old Dutch' in an alcove... and in the next door Lido Bar, a gang of Aussies waltzing Matilda endlessly. (Somewhere underneath all this the ship's broadcast music continued.) Of course since Singapore transistor radios and records playing the Beatles have been added to our repertoire.<sup>6</sup>

Fomison was even unable to escape from all this sound by retiring to his cabin, as the ship's dance band played directly overhead on the upper deck. The continual noise of the ship's engines was the least of the distractions.

The ship's first 'exotic' port of call was Singapore, by which time Fomison's nerves were severely frayed, the ten day stretch with almost no sight of land proving particularly wearying. The poverty and diversity of the cultures represented in Singapore made an enormous impression on Fomison, who spent the day or so the ship was docked exploring the city. He attempted to capture the bizarre sights and experiences of the city in a

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<sup>4</sup>Unpublished edited typescript of letters to New Zealand, March/April 1964, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Letter to Julia & Peter Feran, Easter 1964.

<sup>6</sup>Typescript, op.cit., p. 1.

lengthy letter home to his parents, describing the armed and suspicious Sikh Customs police, the "horde of shouting maniacally grinning tri-shaw and taxi riders", the sights and sounds of a city where a white face was the exception. He wrote:

...I walked alone through the various quarters, enjoying the feeling of being the only white man in the whole world... The narrow lanes of Chinatown fronted to several stories by balconies hung with washing backing down to bomb-sites covered with head high structures of planks and netting and corrugated iron that you took to be fowl houses 'til you saw washing outside. Back in the street the ground floor is arcaded out to the gutter (a three foot ditch into which you spit, piddle and then trip, splash)... Up the side street a robed Indian with white hair and silver teeth grinned up from the pavement by a line of wooden things. He opened one in front of me and said, "Bible", and sat a tiny Arabic book in it, a book prop! The kind of thing you make at High School yet his life depended on their sale... Outside in the sudden sunlight of the street, tri-shaws, taxis and motorbikes shout and honk for possession scattering goats, dogs and pedestrians... From the first and second storey windows long bamboo rods of washing project, crossing one another overhead... in the windows people sit slightly back from the edge, watching. I saw the white bearded face of an old Chinese smoking one of those pipes, who watched me unmoving... On the corner, sugar-cane drinking juice sellers, a woman washing clothes at the foot of a water pump, a scribe in the shade painting messages in red on thin cracker paper for squatting clients... Everywhere noise; icecream sellers' bells, dogs, shouting. A bus bears down on a crowd, [which] effortlessly parts and closes again... barber's chairs along the pavement, grog parlours, the walls lined with photos of Chinese leaders, waist high swing doors just like the Wild West, beautifully carved, cane and cracker shops selling processional masks; funeral parlours, the walls of which are lined with beer bottles and lanterns... a hand and an imploring face appear for a moment on the edge of a passing crowd.<sup>7</sup>

Visual memories such as these could be seen to provide a motivational framework for Fomison's paintings of the early 1970s. His observations on his overseas trip stand as a catalyst for the images of victims living lives scored by disaster - troubles variously political, economic and genetic - which he produced on his return to New Zealand. His examination of

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<sup>7</sup>ibid, pp. 2-3.

these desperate figures was, however, never dispassionate or objective. His empathy with victimization was always subjective, and when depicting suffering as the subject matter of his works, Fomison's identification with his images was absolute. In later years, having put himself in the way of a great deal of personal suffering, the dividing line between the subject of his painting and the exigencies of his private life became increasingly blurred. In a sense, he became his own subject, his pseudo-Romantic lifestyle as vital as the images which documented it. It was, perhaps, his experiences overseas, a few months short of his twenty-fifth birthday, which first revealed to him the essentially symbiotic relationship between his life and his art; where snatches of memory such as the "hand and imploring face" glimpsed within a crowd in Singapore returned to haunt his later graphic depictions of bodily pain.

After travelling through the Bay of Bengal (where all the transistors on the ship picked up Indian music), the *Castel Felice* docked at Colombo, Ceylon, on 1 April 1964. Warned that Ceylon was more dangerous for European people than Singapore had been, Fomison, in the company of other passengers from the ship, accepted the services of a Government guide for his tour of the city. In another letter to his family he wrote:

It took us about 2 hours of traipsing round colonial Victorian Colombo (administration buildings similar to any in N.Z, a 19th century Buddhist temple looking like the Dunedin railway station suddenly filled with painted Roman statues; a postwar shrine all concrete with neon signs on top) before we could convince the guide that ("Call me Cyril, yes, please" he said in Peter Sellers Ceylonese) we wanted to see Ceylonese Ceylon. So we roared in our taxi out of our last temple-yard, past groups of woman seated at the gate selling temple flowers... the sunset was terrific, covering the sky with blue and pink clouds. We passed wealthy villas set in the jungle... we passed an open area with people flying terrific coloured kites in the open air... and weaved to a halt in the midst of a Ceylonese bazaar... the streets, narrow lanes without gutters or power poles, lined with squatting men in robes, no women at all... cripples everywhere (leprosy, shark attacks); we saw one lacking legs below the knees who had a



little wheeled trolley for each stump - he crossed a road through dense traffic quite easily... the stalls were beginning to close, the owners pausing in cleaning up to spit pointedly in our direction... Some of the beggars assumed poses of apparent cripples only when we came in sight; one retained his hunchback long after we'd passed so I turned back to give him something - our guide came back to me in panic, "No, no, no, you must keep together"... We left our shoes outside a mosque and entered to be made uncomfortable by the silent stares of robed believers squatting in the gloom of the arcades...<sup>8</sup>

On the leg through the Arabian Sea towards Aden, dysentery became rife throughout the ship. Fomison attempted to relieve the tedium of the journey with vicious pen-portraits of the ship's passengers and crew in letters home to New Zealand; he was also greatly amused by the 'passengers' concert' ("We had the Indian Love Call out of a trumpet, a German singing an Italian lovesong in English (lapsing into German at the crescendoes, showering the front rows with spit), Fred somebody or other and his clacking bones, he came later with spoons... and of course good old New Zealand mush to finish up with, 'Now is the Hour' by a tribe including at least three Maoris led by an American Mormon").<sup>9</sup>

Next stop was Aden, where Fomison spent time bartering for goods in the local markets before the ship sailed. He wrote to Julia:

We are in the Red Sea, and have passed some islands, just rock and sand, quite a contrast to the jungled, coral-atolled ones we wended our way between, coming up between Australia and the Great Barrier Reef. We should be seeing a few sharks now, its been mostly porpoises and flying fish so far... Oh, we had a death last week, a little old Scotsman that hardly anyone could remember seeing - died of a stroke and was given water-burial 9.30 that night.<sup>10</sup>

Sailing past the Sinai Peninsula and Port Akkaba to Port Suez, at midnight just outside harbour, the *Castel Felice* was overtaken by "a fleet of at least

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<sup>8</sup>ibid, pp 5-7.

<sup>9</sup>ibid, p. 7.

<sup>10</sup>ibid, p. 9.

20 dhows... large white sails blowing in the breeze."<sup>11</sup> Throwing grappling hooks and swarming up ropes, local market vendors set up their wares on the deck, retreating periodically under determined sorties by the crew. Caught up in the excitement of the unexpected piracy, Fomison did not go to bed at all that night.

The next morning, as the ship made its day long passage of the Suez Canal, Fomison explored Cairo. The *Castel Felice* then sailed to Port Said and Cyprus, making its way to Naples and Gibraltar, finally, towards the end of April 1964, reaching the end of its six week journey at Southampton Docks.

FROM SOUTHAMPTON FOMISON took the boat-train to London, where he was met by a fellow sculpture student from the School of Fine Arts. There were a number of New Zealand artists living in London at this time, many of whom, like Fomison, had received Arts Advisory Council grants. Matt Pine, who had studied sculpture at Ilam at the same time as Fomison, had arrived in England in August 1963, and was studying design part-time at the Central School of Art<sup>12</sup>; John Panting was studying sculpture at post graduate level at the Royal College of Art; sculptors Bill Culbert and Carl Sydow were also in London, while Tim Garrity, a painter from Auckland, had travelled to London on the *Castel Felice* with Fomison. As luck would have it, another New Zealander [James Laurensen] was vacating a flat in Putney, and Fomison promptly moved in.

The flat at 7 Ruvigny Gardens suited Fomison well. It overlooked Putney Bridge (where the Oxford and Cambridge Boat Race begins), and the Fulham Palace Gardens; was ten minutes walking distance to the middle of Chelsea in one direction and a mile along the river to the Hammersmith

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<sup>11</sup>*ibid*, p. 9.

<sup>12</sup>Sargeant Gallery, *Matt Pine: Selected Works 1965-1985*, Wanganui, 1986, p. 13.

Palais in another; and was only fifteen minutes by the tube to the Royal College of Art and the National Gallery.

The expatriate New Zealand social circuit was a great introduction for Fomison to the sights of London, which was beginning to buzz with the Carnaby Street fashions and the rise of popular sixties youth culture. Shortly after his arrival Fomison went to hear Little Richard and Ray Charles play and learned to dance the 'mod-trot'. He saw a performance of *Hamlet* in the yard of St. George's Inn, London Bridge, and listened incessantly to the pop music on Radio Luxembourg on a borrowed transistor radio.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of the New Zealanders in London also offered Fomison an opportunity to attend lectures and use the library at the Royal College of Art. Although, unlike his acquaintances, he was not a student affiliated to a post-graduate Art College, he was able to use the facilities under his friends' auspices, and often ate in the cheap student cafeteria at the Royal College. Money was definitely a worry; the grant from the Arts Advisory Council, which had appeared generous from a New Zealand perspective, was soon eaten away by London's higher living costs; sketching and painting materials were also expensive, and the greatest part of Fomison's limited budget was spent on transport to and from public museums and galleries from which he was studying.

Fomison's old friends from The Group in New Zealand had not forgotten him; on one occasion his hunger was assuaged (food was low on the list of purchases with his limited means) by an "enormous 3-course-plus meal, first such I've had in London" at Harrod's restaurant, bought for him by a wealthy friend of Toss Woollaston's who "knew Henry Moore and David Jones".<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 2 July 1964.

<sup>14</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 19 August 1964.

Fomison, however, was undaunted by his financial difficulties, writing to Julia in November 1964 that he was "confident that some gallery will take up my work and in any case I am happier living here so I'll try to stay on".<sup>15</sup> Later that month he contributed a charcoal drawing to an exhibition of New Zealand artists at the Qantas Airway Gallery in Piccadilly.

In early December 1964 Fomison travelled to Paris for the second half of his self-imposed programme of study from the public collections. The way was smoothed for him under the auspices of a distant member of the Fomison family who lived in Paris: Fomison had received an introduction to her through his great aunt Rose, keeper of the family archives, who lived in Newcastle.

In the best health of his life, commenting to Julia that " I think my asthma must have got left behind in Auckland"<sup>16</sup>, Fomison was more than ready to enjoy Paris. The last week of his stay in London had been marred by an unpleasant incident, an unhappy presentiment of future events: chased through the streets in the early hours of the morning by a police dog, he was searched by a policeman whom he noted in an Christmas card to Julia "had a real hook arm."<sup>17</sup>

He described his life in Paris in a letter to his sister:

Spring is everything they say it is in Paris. Afternoons sitting on the Quai, dusk under the trees of the side-walk cafes - talking with drifters and students from all over. Mornings you can see the sun rise from where we are, so I get up to see that, then maybe a walk in one of the big gardens while they're still cool from the night. Today is a grey day, a Sunday, one of those comfortable still ones that you can hear all the neighbourhood noises in... overcast or not the bookstalls along the Quai are open, and the landscape painters are on the bridge doing more Notre Dames.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 20 November 1964.

<sup>16</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>17</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, Christmas 1964.

<sup>18</sup>Undated letter to Julia Feran, [early 1965].

While enjoying the romance of being an artist in Paris in the spring time, Fomison was not blind to the city's seamier side. He sent back descriptions to New Zealand of the 'clochards', homeless drifting men and women who, fallen on hard times, slept in the streets over central heating vents or in doorways. He got to know some of these people as 'regulars' around his hotel on the Quai de la Tournelle, and went down in the evenings sometimes to have a cigarette and to talk to them in the French which he was fast picking up. His days were spent wandering around the city or incarcerated in one of the public museums, sketching and copying portraits of religious scenes by the Old Masters. He had entirely given up painting from his own imagination, and the 'brushy' style which he associated with it, producing small scale and detailed studies in pencil and charcoal reminiscent of the earlier 'archeological' drawing style which he had abandoned at Art School.

Fomison fitted well into the 'Bohemian' lifestyle of the young, penniless and artistic in Paris - indeed, without the backup of the social network of New Zealanders which had been available to him in London, he actively pursued chance acquaintanceships of the sort which are struck up over the remains of a bottle of chianti late at night. A few months of this lifestyle took its toll on his health, and produced its inevitable result - one night, after an entire day spent drinking rum in a bar with a "bearded Canadian and a big German", an incident developed which rapidly resulted in a ride in a French "salad shaker" (a Black Maria so called due to wire and not bars at the window), processing at the Police Station and a night's detoxification at the hospital. Fomison was released without charge the next morning, but he wryly noted to Julia that "they've certainly got me filed."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 10 January 1965.

The year of study ended, the grant payments finished, but Fomison decided to remain in Europe. He had met a West-German painter who had recently graduated from art school in Munich, and took up an invitation to spend some time with her in a Spanish farmhouse in the Balearic Islands near Ibiza. After a quick trip to London to arrange storage for his few possessions, Fomison fled his overdraft at the Bank of New South Wales<sup>20</sup>, and towards the end of May 1965, joined his new friend in San Lorenzo.

Fomison's observation of Spanish culture was perhaps the most profound of any of his experiences during his overseas trip. While days spent exploring exotic cities on the *Castel Felice's* ports of call in Asia had made a great impression on him, particularly concerning the poverty of the inhabitants and the ever-present sense of closeness of death amidst the squalor of teeming life, Fomison spent time in San Lorenzo actually living among those people whom he had previously only observed. The people Fomison met in the Spanish village were barely making a subsistence living from their ancestral land; they were people dogged by the omnipresent nature of death, through disease, neglect, over-work, wars, political uprisings... Living among the local Spaniards, experiencing at first hand the simple and harsh nature of their lives steeped in a grim history, Fomison was deeply moved. Spain's essential heart of darkness, its traditional association of religion with death through the time of the Inquisition, its sense of isolation from the rest of Europe, its public pageantry contrasted with the private hardships of the Spanish people - the country, in fact, which had produced a painter of such eccentric darkness as Goya - touched a responsive chord in Fomison. When, many years later and in the development of his mature style, Fomison's paintings were compared with the tormented visions of Goya<sup>21</sup>, this apt juxtaposition

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<sup>20</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 2 June 1965.

<sup>21</sup>Alexa Johnston, *Anxious Images*, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1984, p. 28.

entailed more than a simple stylistic comparison; Fomison shared with Goya an essential perception perhaps rooted in the Spanish temperament of life among a race of victims, persecuted and branded by an omnipresent sense of death.

The essential difference between Fomison's life and the existence of the Spanish peasants, was, of course, that he was free to make certain choices concerning his lifestyle: free, also, to leave at any time, and to supplement his income by applying to his sister Julia for money, which she forwarded promptly. In a letter dated 2 June 1965, thanking Julia for her most recent loan, Fomison commented that: "it's cheap for us foreigners here (Spanish cigarettes about 6d for 20), [but the people] are so poor that even with the money to pay, you cannot get food from the neighbours. And when they can afford to sell us spuds, its what they themselves eat, the broken and bad ones, because the good ones are exported to England."

From a Western (and holidaying) viewpoint, Fomison's environment in San Lorenzo seemed almost idyllic; writing to Julia that he hoped "to finish the summer here with a body of work for an exhibition", he described the house in which he was staying with the German painter:

It's one of the biggest... of 4 or 5 farms together on a little hill at the centre of an island. They are all whitewashed stone and mud buildings with narrow paths or cobbles between, stepped up and down the hillside into split levels with the roof flat and with grass on, and with ladders so you can climb around them. It dates back at least to when pirates had the island, if not to the Moors before that. Actually the best way to describe the house is to say there's a courtyard. Along one side is the storehouse for mixing whitewash, the dome-roofed bread oven, and the kitchen with the stone fireplace and washing bowl; and along the other side; wooden ladder to roof perch, and the well. In between facing the gateway is the main living room. Its wide door is very old... Inside is our small table where we eat, and a wooden shelf to take the pointed water jars.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 2 June 1965.

A couple of months later, in the heat of the summer, the well at the farmhouse dried up, and fetching water from the public well became Fomison's first task of the morning before the sun became too hot. He regularly bought fish from the fisherman who cycled along the main road to market early in the morning: with his characteristic eye for absurdist detail, Fomison commented to Julia that the fisherman carried a "trumpet" on his bicycle, "a shell exactly the same sort and noise as the Maori war ones". The rest of his days were spent painting or idly lazing in the heat, smoking cigarettes and talking in the evening with the landlord who often visited, communicating with him in broken French and the local dialect in which Fomison's friend was fluent. They went to see a bull fight, taking the bus "full of shouting Spaniards, dust and fleas leaping sociably from owner to owner" to the port, where they saw an exhibition by a provincial troupe, "all wildness and no finesse", where Fomison enjoyed the clowning of the harlequins more than the "showing off" of the young matadors.<sup>23</sup>

Finally, after a disintegration in the relationship between Fomison and the West German painter, the Spanish idyll came to an end, and Fomison left the farmhouse with only a vague idea of his next movements.

He walked first to the port of San Lorenzo where he had seen the bullfight, writing to Julia to request an urgent loan to pay for his travel back to Paris. Staying in a cheap waterfront hotel, producing quick sketches for tourists in return for money or meals, Fomison met with members of an informal 'artists' colony' of Northern European writers and painters who were enjoying a cheap summer holiday in San Lorenzo, complete with drugs easily available from Mediterranean fishing vessels<sup>24</sup>. He fell in with this group for a few days, sitting with them in the sandhills around

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<sup>23</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 16 June 1965.

<sup>24</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, Interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.



the bay. Joined by a friend from Christchurch, who was travelling around Europe, Fomison remained in San Lorenzo for two more days until the money from Julia came through, and set off back to Paris.

Fomison and his friend took a boat to Palma, and another to Barcelona, where they stayed for a few days before attempting to hitchhike to Paris. It took them over a week to travel from Barcelona to Paris; people were loath to give them rides, due, no doubt, as Fomison related, to their "fearsome looking appearance - I looked like a little crim, with long hair"<sup>25</sup>. Often it was too hot to stand by the side of the road for a lift, and they waited in the shade of a tree with their baggage, which included a typewriter and a large suitcase full of drawings. Fomison read *The Complete Works of Franz Kafka* during the time it took to reach Paris. After sundry adventures in the French countryside, which included a night in a decrepid chateau, a meeting with an American art student from Boston<sup>26</sup>, and near starvation (in which Fomison's archaeological field-work experiences in the South Island proved once again his essential resourcefulness, stealing vegetables from farms<sup>27</sup> and living on half a loaf of bread per each day<sup>28</sup>), Fomison and his friend arrived in Paris in early July 1965.

Falling in with a gang of Parisian 'Apaches' they met in a folk-singing club shortly after their arrival, the two men were offered accommodation in the gang's headquarters, a multi-storey boarded up and condemned apartment house in the central city. Once again, Fomison described his surroundings in a letter to Julia, who was shortly to leave for London herself:

We have a box table, two mattresses ('us' is four at the moment), three glasses, a coat hanger, 7 issues of the Paris Match for about 1947, 2 candles and a

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<sup>25</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, 1989.

<sup>26</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 29 July 1965.

<sup>27</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, op.cit.

<sup>28</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 29 July 1965.

reproduction of Rembrandt's 'Supper at Emmaus'... The door doesn't lock so we wedge it up, and climb along the scaffolding that they started to put up at one stage... That way, no one can pinch the furniture, and we can leave belongings there.<sup>29</sup>

Over the next few weeks, life for Fomison settled into a bizarre routine. Taking up residence on the street near the Ecole des Beaux Arts in the morning, Fomison spent his day drawing with coloured chalks on the pavement for money thrown into a hat by passing tourists, retiring when he had accumulated enough cash to buy food and cigarettes. He made copies of paintings by Picasso and the School of Paris, concentrating especially on Picasso's Blue and Rose periods for their commercial appeal. While other members of the 'gang' retouched Fomison's drawings of the day before, Fomison would produce new images, occasionally stopping to "indulge myself in works of my own."<sup>30</sup> Evenings were spent drinking and talking in bars with acquaintances of the day, a bizarre group of "dossers and longhairs"<sup>31</sup> from all over Europe, living on their wits in the streets of the Paris of Baudelaire and Rimbaud. Pavement drawing for money in Paris, though a tradition among the students at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, was technically illegal, and keeping one eye on the drawing and the other scanning the streets for the approach of the gendarmes was a skill which Fomison quickly acquired.

The police were well aware of the borderline activities of the people with whom Fomison associated - other members of the 'gang' were petty thieves or prostitutes - and frequently rounded them up to examine their passports at the local Poste. Fomison wrote to Julia that these hours spent at the police station were "quite fun, they put us all in the same cell, and

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<sup>29</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 29 July 1965.

<sup>30</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.

<sup>31</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

last time there was someone with a mouth organ and someone who could do that Russian dancing."<sup>32</sup> In time the police began to crack down harder on the street vagrants, and kept a watch on the house where Fomison and his friends were sleeping. Fomison subsequently spent the summer nights sleeping under the stars, in parks, building sites and under bridges along the Seine embankment, commenting later that "it was one of the happiest periods of my life, I just lived from day to day."<sup>33</sup> One day while drawing on a pavement near Notre Dame, Fomison's police 'antenna' finally failed him. He was arrested, his passport confiscated, and after a few days in the crowded holding cells of the police station he was charged for vagrancy. The hearing was carried out without the benefit of a lawyer or an interpreter for Fomison, who was sentenced to three weeks incarceration in La Santé prison.

La Santé, which Fomison was later delighted to discover was the prison in which the writer Jean Genet had also spent some time, was a grim place. It housed political prisoners as well as ordinary criminals, and was structured around a routine designed to elicit as little trouble from the inmates as possible. The toilet facilities were communal and extremely primitive: the remanded prisoners, four or five to a cell, were frequently forced to sleep on the floor due to lack of mattresses; short term prisoners, such as Fomison, were not allowed out for exercise; the food was minimal and of poor quality, giving no energy. It must have been a frightening time for Fomison, alone, friendless, destitute, and without a fluent grasp of the language. On his first night in the cell, regarded with mute hostility by its other occupants, he broke down and cried in front of them.<sup>34</sup> Gradually, however, he became accepted by his cell-mates, and shared their drugs, which were in plentiful supply through La Santé's black market. After a

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<sup>32</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 29 July 1965.

<sup>33</sup>Murray Horton, *op.cit.*, p. 9.

<sup>34</sup>Lara Strongman, *op.cit.*

few days he volunteered to aid another prisoner with an escape attempt, but was greatly relieved when the idea did not eventuate.<sup>35</sup>

When his short sentence came to an end, Fomison was given four days to leave the country. Collecting his possessions (a few clothes and the suitcase of Spanish drawings) from a friend's apartment, he caught the ferry back to England with a ticket paid for by the New Zealand Embassy<sup>36</sup>, and was readmitted to the country with great difficulty. A New Zealand friend obligingly provided Fomison with a room in his flat (he wrote to Julia that the friend had "a record of someone rustling a quid, very good listening it is too"<sup>37</sup>), where he remained for a couple of weeks. His finances re-energized by the sale of two large charcoal drawings to Ron O'Reilly, who had recently arrived in London<sup>38</sup>, in late September 1965 he set off on a hitchhiking trip around Britain.

He travelled first to Dorset, and on to Wiltshire, where he spent some time in Salisbury, missing Stonehenge because of the pouring rain.<sup>39</sup> After a night spent at the house of another chance acquaintance in a bar, a man who had once visited New Zealand, Fomison hitch-hiked to Stratford-upon-Avon where he spent several days with a friend from Christchurch who was working as a 'spearholder' in the Royal Shakespeare Company. Bob Dylan's *Mr Tambourine Man* had just been released, and Fomison bought the record and played it incessantly.<sup>40</sup>

He then travelled north with a vague intention to see Scotland, and called in a Whitley Bay in Newcastle on the way to visit the great aunt with whom he had corresponded but had not met, Mrs Frances Rollinson. Mrs

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<sup>35</sup>Jim and Mary Barr, op cit.

<sup>36</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p. 10.

<sup>37</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 4 September 1965.

<sup>38</sup>ibid.

<sup>39</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 2 October 1965.

<sup>40</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

Rollinson was a widow with fading eyesight who lived alone: she had recently broken her ankle, and Fomison was the first New Zealand relative she had ever seen. Fomison sacrificed his plans for Scotland and stayed with his great aunt for a month while she recovered, making himself useful around her home and listening to her stories of other branches and members of the family. Mrs Rollinson kept a large number of documents and letters relating to the extended Fomison family, and with her Fomison learned a great deal of his own pakeha *whakapapa*. The matter of his own lineage became a matter of great importance to him through his immersion in Maori culture and the significance with which it regards ancestry. As a third generation New Zealander of European extraction, the cultural codes in which Fomison's own lineage was rooted provided for him a personal identification with the past.

Fomison's time in Whitley Bay with his great aunt coincided with his sister Julia's voyage to England, following the same route as Fomison had travelled eighteen months previously, and at the end of October 1965 Fomison said goodbye to Mrs Rollinson and set off to meet Julia. It was an emotional parting with his great aunt: he walked away from her house through a magnificent sunset towards the railway station, carrying in his baggage family photographs and letters which she had given him and others which he had taken: both he and she knew that they would never see one another again.<sup>41</sup>

Fomison met Julia as she embarked from the *SS Himalaya* at Tilbury Docks (writing to her that he "would be the one doing a haka-and-handstands act and passing the hat around.")<sup>42</sup> Julia had come to work as an occupational therapist in London, and accompanied by her husband, she led a markedly different lifestyle to that of her older brother. She and

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<sup>41</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>Letter to Julia Feran, 25 October 1965.

Fomison saw each other often, however, and although living in the same city continued to correspond with one another by post due to Fomison's lack of access to a telephone.

Determined to remain in London and paint, Fomison took the first of what became a series of grim, low paid jobs in the cafes of Battersea, where he had found a bedsit at 56 Ravenet Street. Painting by night, Fomison would first produce a drawing, a study of an historical European painting which he knew from reproduction or his study of the public collections. He then worked the initial study into a monochromatic painting, 'colouring in' the forms with fine applications of tone.<sup>43</sup> Poverty-stricken again, exhausted and irritated by the menial work necessary to support himself, life quickly became very difficult for Fomison. The deprivations inherent in the pseudo-Romantic lifestyle of a young artist, initially bearable and even attractive to him in terms of their novelty and rapid transposition from one exotic location to another, quickly palled in the bleakness of an English winter. No longer simply an observer of the misery and vicissitudes of others, identifying with them in terms of the outsider looking in, Fomison rapidly became a victim himself. As he carried out his self-imposed sentence of hardship in London, confusion and depression indicated no possibility of an immediate release from his sufferings. The act of painting itself, the purpose of this misery, became increasingly impossible.

A relief from the isolation which Fomison was experiencing came sporadically with trips made with Julia and other friends to churches in the Home Counties, making crayon rubbings of the commemorative brasses. Fomison and his sister also visited the small village of Clyste Fomison, out of Exeter in Devon, where the ancient parish church gave evidence of the emergence of the Fomison family in the eleventh century.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *op.cit.*

Fomison continued to see the remnants of the New Zealand contingent of artists in London socially throughout the time he spent in the city, noting in a letter to Julia in June 1966 that:

On Friday I went to see the Royal College of Art's annual display of graduates' work - a few of my friends had works in it. Saw some films they'd made, and went to their last-of-the-year Bar Party... This Wednesday I'm going to a meeting of NZ painters at the Six Bells, Chelsea, we might be having a show.<sup>45</sup>

It appeared that this proposal for an exhibition was never realised, even though Fomison, at least, was "painting madly".<sup>46</sup> Over the winter and spring of 1966 his painting style had undergone a subtle change, reverting to the careful draughtsmanship and limited palette he had employed before attending Art School. This method of working, however, entailed considerable time spent on the execution of each work, which presented great logistical problems for Fomison. He wrote to Julia that his new paintings were "unlike the sure-shit - no I mean Quick Fire way of painting I had at home", and added that "I can't paint during the week as a piece might get dry and I wouldn't be able to alter it or add to it without starting again."<sup>47</sup> Fomison painted the small **Head of Christ by Morales** (1966) [Fig. 7] at this time, which marks an interesting transition point between the less formal, 'brushy' style of earlier years and the detailed rendition of a 'ready-made' image important in his work over the next decade. Allegiance to the past is revealed by the choice of subject matter - like the early monotypes and charcoals, a head - but in this work a deep feeling of unease is created through a sophistication of composition not present in the earlier works. Christ's head, which fills nearly the whole picture surface, is positioned

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<sup>44</sup>Information given to the author by Julia Fomison, 1990.

<sup>45</sup>Letter to Julia Fomison, 20 June 1966.

<sup>46</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>47</sup>Letter to Julia Fomison, 7 July 1966.

awkwardly off-centre, while the spiky, twisted form of the crown of thorns leads the eye relentlessly around the subject. The pointed thorns are echoed by the the thick, tapering strokes of Christ's beard, matted into bloody clumps which drip and stain his white robe. The suggestion of a hand at the base of the image, lifted - and transfixed - in weary supplication completes Fomison's deeply humanistic portrait of Christ, via Morales. The image is caught on a roughly textured hessian ground, which adds to the simple directness of the work: it appears almost as a death mask stained into a shroud, like a bloody stigmata imprinted into a bandage. Feeling cautiously confident that this new manner of working signified a successful new direction for him, Fomison painted over and recycled many of his earlier images from his time in London. He commented that: "...the result is about the first I've sort of been satisfied with in about two years: the big scale of my old stuff, but the forms and colour much more carefully described."<sup>48</sup>

By mid-1966, an escape from the confines of his life in London began to appear increasingly necessary, and without money to pay for his fare back to New Zealand, Fomison investigated the possibilities of working his passage home.<sup>49</sup> There was another escape from hard reality, more easily arranged, by drug dealers who frequented the Battersea cafes where Fomison worked: the amphetamines which he took in increasingly large quantities gave him artificial energy and cast an air of pleasing unreality over the grim routine of his life. He appeared to be locked into a downward spiral from which there was no escape. In his more lucid moments, the bleakness of his existence hit hard. A future spent living in a dingy bedsit, working in dirty and understaffed kitchens for minimal pay, horrified him<sup>50</sup>, but he was

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<sup>48</sup>Undated letter to Julia Ferau [i 1966]

<sup>49</sup>undated letter to Julia Ferau [ii 1966]

<sup>50</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, op. cit.



unable to break the chain of circumstances which had led him to this situation. Desperate, confused, lost, Fomison graduated quickly from amphetamines to harder drugs and fell into a period of black depression.

The misery of the next few months, which Fomison described as being "absolutely at the bottom"<sup>51</sup>, culminated in a final terrible night towards the end of 1966. Fomison had spent the evening at a night club with friends, returning home to his bedsit to paint. He worked for a time at a small dark painting depicting Cleopatra<sup>52</sup>, in which tentative and hesitant forms are isolated in a morass of black paint: a strange, compelling image, unrelated in subject to the other interpretations of 'famous' paintings upon which he was engaged. He finally laid aside his brushes, and took a massive - and presumably potentially fatal - overdose of drugs. It is unclear whether or not he actually meant to commit suicide: he was certainly deeply depressed, and surrounded by his recent images of the dying Christ, may have perceived death as a solution to his problems. While he later claimed that the overdose was deliberate<sup>53</sup>, this may have not been strictly true: he was already full of drugs after his evening at the club, and may have been confused about the amount he had previously taken. In any event, he woke in the middle of the night and summoned the strength to stumble around the streets of Battersea looking for a telephone to call an ambulance. He finally found a telephone in working order on Albert Bridge in Chelsea, where the ambulance team found him lying unconscious on the ground. Fomison later said of the Cleopatra painting: There is a connection between that painting and what happened that night, but I never touched that painting again. It's unfinished but I'll never sell [it]."<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup>ibid.

<sup>52</sup>ibid.

<sup>53</sup>ibid.

<sup>54</sup>ibid.

When the nature of his condition was known by the authorities, Fomison was admitted (and committed) to Banstead Hospital in Chelsea, a psychiatric facility. He remained in Banstead for about three months, a period about which he later fondly reminisced. It seems, though, as if these fond tales of life in the hospital surrounded by pop stars and artists with drug and alcohol problems and the freedom to buy drugs at the local chemist<sup>55</sup>, were fictionalized and very much a salve to his wounded pride. Other accounts place him in a locked ward of the Victorian Gothic hospital, deeply depressed and fighting withdrawal from drugs.<sup>56</sup>

Julia visited her brother in hospital when she was able, bringing with her his materials, prepared canvasses and unfinished works from the bedsit in Battersea, packing up and storing the rest of his possessions. Initially, Fomison resisted the idea of occupational therapy, but with the encouragement of an OT nurse at the hospital, he began to paint again. As before, his starting point was the religious images of the great masters, but this time, unable to gain direct access to the works in the collections, he worked from illustrations in books which Julia and the nurse in Banstead located for him. Fomison later commented: "This is where I got stuck into my painting. The closed distraction-free environment helped me to concentrate - this was the most continuous period of painting I did overseas."<sup>57</sup> He painted several full-scale works during his time in the hospital, including **Resurrection after Bellini. Banstead.**, and **Dominico Ghirlandaio's Old Man and Boy** [Fig. 8]. The latter work is interesting in its early indication of the more graphic, hard-edged drawing style which Fomison adopted on his return to New Zealand. It also reveals the spatial and figural distortion present in many of the later works, also begun from

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<sup>55</sup>Lara Strongman, op.cit.

<sup>56</sup>Information given to the author by Julia Fomison.

<sup>57</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p. 10.

the starting point of reproductions of historical European paintings.

Fomison also spent time in Banstead Hospital watching the other inmates: the often macabre nature of their activities both fascinated and disturbed him, but he must have been greatly relieved when a letter from New Zealand arrived from various of his old patrons among the Group, who, hearing of his predicament, offered to pay for his boat fare home. At the end of three months it appeared as though Fomison, no longer on the hospital's files as a recent admission under observation, was to be either transferred to another ward as a more permanent arrangement, or would be discharged. He was discharged: the Arts Advisory Council allocated money to pay the deposit on the ticket, and Fomison retraced the journey by ship, arriving at Lyttelton in early 1967, having been away for nearly three years.

## CHAPTER FOUR

# CHRISTCHURCH

## 1967 - 1973

Take me disappearing/ through the smoke rings of my mind/  
 Down the foggy ruins of time/ far past the frozen leaves/  
 and haunted frightened trees/ Out to the windy beach/  
 Far past the twisted reach of crazy sorrow.<sup>1</sup>

AFTER THE PHYSICAL and mental confinement of Banstead Hospital, the enclosed surroundings of the ship on the journey home to New Zealand must have been a living nightmare for Fomison. Stripped of the enthusiasm and sense of incipient adventure which had coloured his arrival in Europe three years previously, he commented that "the first sight of Lyttelton was quite horrifying. It looked like the First Four Ships had just arrived the day before."<sup>2</sup>

It is not difficult to imagine the despondency he must have felt on his return to the country. He had left New Zealand for Europe as a young artist of great promise, a painter who with local support had swiftly risen to some degree of provincial prominence, an achievement crowned by the unusually flexible tailor-made travel grant which he had been awarded by the national art establishment. He returned to New Zealand deeply depressed, suffering physically and mentally, penniless (and indeed, in debt: he was obliged to repay the sponsors who had sent money for his

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<sup>1</sup>Bob Dylan, from *Mr Tambourine Man*, (*Bringing it all Back Home*, CBS Records), 1965.

<sup>2</sup>Murray Horton, 'Something Nasty in the Woodshed', *Canta*, February/March 1974, p.10.

ticket home). The buoyancy and self-confidence which had sped his departure had been eroded by the grim experiences and sense of anonymity which had confronted him overseas. He commented later: "I was just one of the anonymous thousands flocking through the galleries, I mattered nothing, absolutely nothing. This is where my ego got its knockbacks."<sup>3</sup>

The remainder of 1967 was a hard year for Fomison. Desperately short of money, he took a job on the Hereford Street pie-cart, a Christchurch institution of long standing which sold pies and chips from the windows of a converted bus. Fomison later wryly viewed the time he spent working on the pie-cart as "a great introduction to my working class culture"<sup>4</sup>, adding elsewhere that "I saw more fights there than I did in London."<sup>5</sup>

Although Fomison had spent a great deal of time painting during his enforced leisure hours in hospital over the previous few months, on his return to Christchurch his output slowed to almost nothing.<sup>6</sup> Re-establishing his contacts with The Group and the Society of Arts, he exhibited four works - **The Wisdom Stone**, **The Site Foreman**, **Detail Study for an Imaginary Monument to the Strongman Mine Disaster**, and **St John the Baptist's Head brought in a Plate to the Feast** - none of which was for sale, as a guest in the 'Annual Group Exhibition' at the Durham Street Art Gallery in mid-1967.

After leaving the pie-cart, Fomison spent the summer of 1967-68 working with his friend from his fieldwork days, Owen Wilkes, picking tomatoes at Governor's Bay in Lyttelton Harbour. He spent the following

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<sup>3</sup>ibid, p.9.

<sup>4</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

<sup>5</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.10.

<sup>6</sup>Lara Strongman, op.cit.

winter on the dole, and attempted to resume the archeological fieldwork he had abandoned in 1963. However, establishments and personalities had changed in the intervening years, and Fomison was unable to arrange financial backing for the work he had planned concerning the style sequence of Maori rock art.<sup>7</sup> He had wavered for years between deciding on a career as an anthropologist (with artistic interests) or as an artist (with an archeological background); lack of financial support to pursue his anthropological line of discovery meant that his choice was made for him. After some time back in the country he began to paint again. He worked slowly and painstakingly, continuing to explore the graphic monochromatic drawing style with which he had begun to experiment during his final few months in London. He completed **From a photo of Patara te Tuhi** (1968) [Fig. 9] at this time, which marks an interesting transition point between the work Fomison produced in the three years after leaving art school and that of the early 1970s, when he produced his first mature series of paintings. **From a photo of Patara te Tuhi** shows an allegiance to the past in the choice of subject matter - like the earlier monotypes and charcoals, a Maori head - but anticipates the later work in its hard-edged simplification of form. The description of the figure is still sculptural, in its concern for the interplay of light and shade over mass, but unlike Fomison's early 'heads', discards the convention of frenzied expressionistic detail to describe three-dimensional form, relying instead on large areas of clean chiaroscuro to convey a sense of weight and solidity.

After renting a studio in which to work at 393 Montreal Street, Fomison renewed his interest in carving, and acquired some large blocks of Oamaru stone. Llew Summers, who had left school and was working on a farm outside Christchurch, often visited Fomison in the studio on

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<sup>7</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.10.

weekends home in the city. Despite the difference of a decade between their ages, a strong, easy rapport existed between the two: a friendship strengthened by Summers's first tentative attempts to produce his own stone carving, inspired by Fomison's examples. This initial encouragement, friendly criticism and practical advice meant a great deal to Summers, who continued to produce works in stone, wood, and later, cement, in subsequent years enjoying a substantial degree of popular success and working full-time as an artist.

Fomison's association with Llew Summers was one of a number of social connections which he renewed on his return to New Zealand. Ties with Christchurch's arts community had been cemented by the invitation to exhibit with The Group in 1967: work by Fomison was also selected for the exhibition of '100 New Zealand Painters' in 1968, part of the city's Pan Pacific Arts Festival. However, by 1968, Fomison was actively pursuing another significant set of acquaintances - members of what Murray Horton described as Christchurch's "local gear scene"<sup>8</sup>.

Re-establishing his links with other young artists in Christchurch, Fomison began to attend parties given by art students. On one evening Fomison was approached by a young man with a beard, who greeted him as an old acquaintance. Philip Clairmont, whom Fomison had last encountered holidaying in Kaikoura in 1963, had recently moved to Christchurch to study painting at the art school. The early acquaintanceship became a firm friendship, and when Fomison was evicted - for drug use - from his current flat <sup>9</sup>, he took up Clairmont's invitation to move into the flat at 92c Riccarton Road which Clairmont shared with two other art students. Like Fomison's first flat in Armagh Street, 92c was well known as a haunt of young artists; the weekend parties

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<sup>8</sup>ibid, p.10.

<sup>9</sup>ibid, p.10.

there after closing time at the Gresham Hotel, a popular drinking place for students in the city, were the stuff of minor legend. Drugs were in frequent and plentiful supply at the flat, and it was there that Fomison "was introduced to the needle scene"<sup>10</sup> and the hardest drugs then available in Christchurch.

Fomison found the environment at the flat behind the butcher's shop in Riccarton Road stimulating in many ways, and produced a great deal of work there. He began *No!* (1971) [Fig. 10], one of his most significant and successful paintings from this period, during the August University holidays of 1969, when his flatmates were away at an arts festival in Dunedin and he was able to use the living room of the flat for a studio rather than his small bedroom. *No!* was the largest work he had attempted at this date, and remained for several years the largest work he managed to complete to his own satisfaction.<sup>11</sup>

*No!* was begun from a photograph clipped by Fomison from *The Sunday Times* in London during January 1966, which had travelled home to New Zealand with him on his return from Europe. The original newspaper photograph documented the gestural reaction of a local blacksmith to the proposed commuter suburb which was to be built around his village. Fomison removed the image from its context and painted a 'copy' of it, relying on the troubled face of the figure subject and the graphic gesture of rejection, whereby the hand in close focus appears to push the viewer away from the image, to impart a new, more general meaning to the work.

*No!* is particularly significant in its early indication of conventions which Fomison was to adopt in his work of the early 1970s. The focus on the human hand as a vehicle for expressive emotion, and the emotive

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<sup>10</sup>Lara Strongman, op.cit.

<sup>11</sup>Tony Fomison, unpublished document, Artists' Files, Robert McDougall Art Gallery, Christchurch.



distortion of the figure to the point of deformity, presage a number of works painted from 1970-73, as does the photographic source. Fomison gave many clippings from his personal archive of news photographs to Philip Clairmont at this time, and these images became a source and material background for many of Clairmont's collages produced over the first few years of the 1970s.<sup>12</sup>

While it was easier for Fomison to survive on limited funds in Christchurch than it had been in London, his hard drug habit required a certain degree of finance for its support. By early 1969, Fomison had taken two jobs: one as a caretaker at the Workers' Educational Association (WEA), and the other as Exhibitions Assistant with buying and curatorial responsibilities, at the Canterbury Society of Arts, which had recently moved to a new purpose-built gallery at 66 Gloucester Street.

Through his association with The Group, Fomison had established a good relationship with the new director of the Art Society's gallery, Mr Russell (Rusty) Laidlaw. The increased wall space at the new gallery after its previous premises at Durham Street meant that initially the resources of the Society were stretched to accommodate exhibitions which filled the entire gallery, and Rusty Laidlaw readily accepted Fomison's offer to exhibit his large tracings of Maori rock drawings. The Gallery paid Fomison to staff the exhibition, and to talk to the visiting groups of high school students: after its close, Fomison remained as an employee of the Society of Arts, helping to hang, administer and initiate exhibitions.

Fomison took his new responsibilities seriously, studying and researching the CSA's permanent collection and for a time becoming the Gallery's unofficial curator. Among his first purchases for the Society's collection were two contemporary works from recent shows at its Gallery,

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<sup>12</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Clairmont*, Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council of New Zealand/Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, 1987, p. 27.

**Black Painting** by Ralph Hotere, and **Amusement** by Philip Trusttum.<sup>13</sup> At the time of Fomison's employment, the CSA Gallery was very much the focus for contemporary art in the city. Anything vaguely experimental or new and exciting was exhibited at the CSA rather than at Christchurch's public art museum, the Robert McDougall Art Gallery, which, hampered through lack of funding, was unable to either mount touring exhibitions or to add in any significant way to its own contemporary collection, and presented a static display of historical works. The CSA assumed the role of providing a venue for the touring exhibitions of contemporary art which were beginning to originate in the North Island at this time, as well as providing exhibition space for its own members.

Under Fomison's inspiration, the Society of Arts also mounted exhibitions of historical works drawn from its collection. Fomison mounted an exhibition of Victorian portrait and figure painting at the Gallery in late 1969, and produced an essay on 'attitudes and techniques of Victorian painters' which was reproduced for the information of visitors.<sup>14</sup> Delving into the painting storage areas, Fomison was intrigued by an unusual and unsigned Victorian work, the provenance of which was unknown to the Gallery's staff. After some months of intensive research, Fomison identified the oil painting as a preparatory study by the eminent English painter W.P. Frith (1819-1909)<sup>15</sup>, largely known for his panoramic scenes of Victorian life.

Spending his days as a scholar, administrator and legitimate member of the arts establishment, Fomison's private life was as illegitimate as ever. Taking opium himself in large quantities, he was also dealing in drugs to others, and had a number of brushes with the police, who were well aware

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<sup>13</sup>*News*, Journal of the Canterbury Society of Arts, January 1970, n.p.

<sup>14</sup>*ibid*, n.p.

<sup>15</sup>*News*, Journal of the Canterbury Society of Arts, March 1970, no. 30, n.p.

of his activities.<sup>16</sup> As criminals became aware of the lucrative opportunities in the drug world, the 'scene' was growing more dangerous. At about this time Fomison bought a gun, presumably with ideas of self-protection.<sup>17</sup> In actuality, the gun was used for no more than target practice at the Waimakariri river bed, but its presence indicated Fomison's involvement in a lifestyle which was growing increasingly more menacing.

A police raid on the central city house in Beveridge Street into which Fomison had moved early in 1970, resulted in his arrest for possession and use of opium, a hypodermic syringe and needles. Described in the local newspaper as "a 30-year-old drug dependent artist", Fomison was sentenced to six weeks imprisonment, followed by a year's probation. Given the nature of his offence, his sentence was light. The Judge took into account the "excellent testimonials" furnished on Fomison's behalf by "three prominent citizens", which established Fomison as "a person of sensitivity, [who] had achieved degrees of recognition in the field of art and was a law-abiding person who was thought of highly".<sup>18</sup>

On the fifteenth of July, 1970, Fomison began his six week custodial sentence at Rolleston Prison, on the environs of Christchurch. He was already well versed in the ways of institutions, and it appeared that a New Zealand prison was little different: "Rolleston was exactly like primary school, having to queue up, go in crocodiles everywhere, having to kick a ball to keep warm, the underground culture of comics and *Man* magazines - you suddenly realize that this is what our school system is like."<sup>19</sup> Three days after his incarceration began, a friend brought in his art materials and some unfinished works. Repeating the experience of

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<sup>16</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.11.

<sup>17</sup>Garth Cartwright, interview with Tony Fomison, 1986. Author's interview with Llewelyn Summers, 1989.

<sup>18</sup>Artist Jailed for Opium Offences', *The Star*, 16 June 1970.

<sup>19</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.10.

Banstead Hospital, Fomison utilized the time spent away from the pressures of the outside world to work at his art: "I probably did more painting in Rolleston than in a comparable period outside."<sup>20</sup> Among the works which Fomison produced while in prison are **Paparua, 1970** [Fig. 11], a methodically crafted portrait in pencil, and **Portrait of a lag, kitchen (1970)** [Fig. 12], which recalls the savage chiaroscuro and hard-edged simplification of form of his earlier **No!** [Fig. 10].

Twice a week Fomison travelled to Paparua Prison to see the doctor, and while there witnessed a 'protest' by inmates against harsh treatment by the staff. He also saw the 'kangaroo courts' held by prisoners for known sex-offenders, and the brutal physical assaults which inevitably followed. His experience was, again, as it had been on his trip overseas, that of the detached observer: the essential difference this time, however, lay in the degree of his detachment. The intellectual-cum-philosophical empathy he had felt with victimized and suffering people he had encountered on his trip to Europe, had, by means of his own later experiences, become a personal psychological association with the downtrodden, the oppressed, the unlucky: an empathy with society's victims had led Fomison to assume their role of suffering for himself. Living as a prisoner - albeit for a relatively short time - with other of society's outcasts and 'undesirables', involved an association with his fellow inmates not found in mere observation. For a while, at least, prison life was Fomison's life: prison culture, his culture: thus, while he pitied the experience of the sex-offenders, he identified with and even admired the "staunch, trustworthy" qualities of the main body of inmates.<sup>21</sup>

Released after a month, Fomison returned to his flat in Beveridge Street and threw a party to celebrate.<sup>22</sup> Undeterred by his conviction from

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<sup>20</sup>ibid, p.10.

<sup>21</sup>ibid, p.10.

resuming his pre-prison lifestyle, he commented: "I had the biggest hit of opium I've ever had the day I went into court, the next shot was the day I came out."<sup>23</sup> Grateful for the understanding his employers at the WEA and the CSA showed him in allowing him to continue working after his release from prison,<sup>24</sup> life for Fomison continued much as it had before his arrest.

A study of the subject matter of his paintings from this period, however, reveals the deep effect which his experience in prison had on his mind. The relatively few paintings he had produced on his return from Europe had continued the theme and styles he had initiated abroad in his study of the works of the 'old masters'. Working from reproductions again, the geographical isolation of New Zealand and the country's lack of access to the visual resource of historical European painting mirroring his previous isolation within Banstead Hospital, Fomison continued to produce 'copies' of famous paintings, such as **Dying Beggar by Ceruti. No. 2** (1970-71) [Fig. 16], **Detail from Piero della Francesca's "The Resurrection"** (1970), from a reproduction of the work in the Palazzo Communale, Borgo San Sepolcro, Italy, and **copy of Antonello da Messina's "Salvator Mundi"** (1970) [Fig. 15], after the original in the National Gallery in London. The limited colouration of these works, in part a result of the largely monochromatic reproductions in art books and magazines which served as his models, continued the tradition of his earliest days as a painter, when the application of colour had served only to muddy and cloud form. Overseas, Fomison had discovered a way of painting with which he felt far more at ease than with the expressionistic catharsis of his Art School work. He had devised a way to 'draw' with paint, rounding out initial

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<sup>22</sup>Author's interview with Llewelyn Summers, 1989.

<sup>23</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.11.

<sup>24</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

outlined forms with careful application of tone, producing highlights with later glazes and washes and by the expedient of leaving areas of the canvas unpainted, creating recession into depth with a darkly pre-painted ground. Study of European masters had produced an understanding of the technical aspects of oil painting which Fomison had not wholly assimilated at art school, as well as a feeling for expression of emotion through virtuoso effects of chiaroscuro.

Back in New Zealand, Fomison had developed his new-found technique further, producing a second version of **Study of Head of Christ by Morales** over two days in July 1969. (The first version [Fig. 7] had been painted shortly before his collapse in London in 1966, and had been finished and signed in Banstead Hospital.) The later work lacks the rawness and brutality of the 1966 version: it is more carefully controlled, its drawing fluid and precisely modelled, the weave of the ground finer. It reveals Fomison's technical abilities as a monochromatic draughtsman, owing more to the discipline of drawing than of painting. It is similar in conception to drawings produced by Fomison at this time, such as **Paparua, 1970** [Fig. 11] or **Tangi for Moruroa Atoll** (1973).

Images from Christ's Passion, filtered through and shaped by the vision of great past religious masters, are a recurrent theme in his paintings of 1967-70. He painted **Resurrection after Bellini, Banstead** (1967) (after the original in the Berlin Museum) in the hospital in London, and completed **From Bellini: Christ at the Tomb** (1967) after his return to New Zealand. He continued his reinterpretation of religious works by the 'old masters' for three years, drifting away from this subject matter a few months after his release from prison in 1970. The final work which can be attributed to this series is **Second Study of Hans Holbein the Younger's 'The Dead Christ'**, painted in May/June 1971 and finished in September that year, a dark, intensely dramatic work which depicts Christ's body

decomposing in the tomb, taken from a reproduction of the original in the Germanisches Nationalmuseum. Perhaps Fomison was drawn to the portrayal of Christ as a metaphor for his own inner torment, a symbol for human spiritual suffering which transcends the merely religious. Christ's role as a prophet, speaking unpalatable truths from the fringes of society, a lone voice in the wilderness misunderstood and persecuted to the point of death, leaving behind a tangible message to be deciphered in spiritual terms of 'truth' or 'reality', may have appeared to Fomison to mirror his perception of the role of the artist. It is significant that the majority of the historical models which Fomison appropriated depict Christ at the point of (human) death, a popular theme among pre-Renaissance purveyors of religious art intent on portraying the humanism of contemporary theology.

**Detail from Piero della Francesca's 'The Resurrection'**, painted in the month before Fomison's imprisonment in 1970, involved, like **Head of Christ by Morales**, a personal transformation of an historical model. Fomison narrowed the spatial proportions of the original work and removed the naturalistic landscape in the background, modelling forms with an uncompromisingly harsh chiaroscuro: Christ in light, emerging from an inky darkness. A similarly titled work from this time uses the same historical work as a starting point for a portrait of Christ, enclosed within a curved frame shaped like a Romanesque arch. Here none of the majesty or transcendence traditionally associated with depictions of the Resurrection are apparent; the face is eaten away by darkness, features gloomily earthbound, the mouth like a white scar in the darkness of the beard. **copy of Antonello da Messina's 'Salvator Mundi'** [Fig. 15], painted a few months later, presents a similar vision of Christ's imagined face, which lacks the essential peace and tranquillity of the source: the

cadaverous face and fixed, staring eyes develop a strong sense of unease, a feeling extended by the puny, semi-deformed hand raised in weak benediction at the lower edge of the image - a gesture of strength and definition in Da Messina's original.

The words of justification which Fomison applied to the titles of these works of the late 1960s and early 1970s are significant to their interpretation. "Detail from..", "Copy of..".... the titles suggest that Fomison viewed his reworking of historical models primarily as an exercise for personal study, more an exercise in the assimilation of the artistic lessons and visions of the past than an original, self-generated image from the artist's imagination. However, following the time Fomison spent within the walls of Rolleston Prison, a new direction becomes increasingly apparent in his work of the early to mid-1970s, resurfacing and twining around itself like notes of a fugue.

The first theme to emerge involved a new pictorial staring point for Fomison: the depiction of physical features gleaned from anatomical texts and contemporary news photographs. A logical extension of the imagery surrounding the wounded and vulnerable humanity of Christ, the works are indications of a universal humanity devoid of the 'subtext' of the religious content. The images portray human life as an essentially fragile state, easily perverted from the companionship of the norm into the searing loneliness of deformity. The subject matter is the stuff of physical tragedy, charged with an emotionally heady mix of horror and empathy - a blend of feeling with which Fomison appeared to have more than a nodding acquaintance. **Hairy Man of Mandalay** (a.k.a. **Facial Hypertrichosis**) [Fig. 14], painted in March 1970, is one of the earliest of these works: a human face genetically wounded by a mammalian growth of hair, a creature of horror and myth with the features of a sad, wearied



and potentially maddened human being. **Hairy Man of Mandalay** was an image with which Fomison identified on a deeply personal level - his persecutions during puberty have previously been noted - commenting in 1979 as an introduction to the work : "I was born premature, that little body all covered with hair."<sup>25</sup>

Other images from this time such as **Malaria Victim, New Guinea**, and **Carcinoma of the Tongue**, both painted in 1970, examine the range of expression and emotion present in the depiction of the human figure. **Skull Face** (1970) [Fig. 13], reveals Fomison at his strongest and most confident, manipulating the emotions of the viewer with an image of pseudo-Gothic horror. **Study of a Hand**, painted in December 1970, is culled from an image appearing on page 384 of a copy of **Roxburgh's Common Skin Diseases** (1961), owned by Fomison. Emerging from the sticky gloom of a seventeenth century chiaroscuro, a broad-palmed, blunt and twisted fingered hand is raised in an obscure gesture, the meaning of which is determined by the emotional state of its viewer. Does it imply supplication? Benediction? Yearning? The hand of a carpenter about to be nailed to a cross? This is truly an 'anxious image', and was included in the 1984 exhibition of the same name. It is an image of a mysterious unease, capable of admitting any number of readings, all to the black side of emotion. Its semi-religious/mystical tone establishes it as a devotional painting, an image for spiritual contemplation and study. It is an enigma to ponder, a spiritual exercise like a Buddhist koan, where the conclusion is simultaneously that there are many answers of equal merit to address any problem, and that one of these conclusions is that there are no answers.

The second thematic body of works to emerge in the early 'seventies can be loosely identified as 'institutional' images. Paintings such as **But**

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<sup>25</sup>Jim & Mary Barr. *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, exhibition catalogue, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1979, n.p.

**There's Nothing wrong with me** (1971), **Mugshot** (1971) [Fig 17], **From a Mark Adams Photo of a Sunnyside Patient** (1972), **An Institution Wall**, **"Three's a Crowd"** (1972) and **Rueful Prisoner** (1973), all postdate Fomison's release from Rolleston Prison and are informed by his experiences behind its walls. These paintings deal with entrapment and imprisonment. Dim faces peer at the viewer between heavy bars or are encased within fixed grimaces. The dividing line between the prisoner of crime and the mental patient is blurred: both are guilty of the crimes of abnormality and irrationality. The prisoner, the criminal, the victim, all are outcasts from the norm, dangerous individuals penned together in a shared institutional life. Of his attitude to and intentions for these works, Fomison revealed:

My painting is what's left over from me as a human being. It's a reaction against the predicament we're in today. My cell paintings - I'm not going to make noble savages out of people serving sentences. I guess my years in archeology were an attempt to come to terms with how caveman we still are. I still paint Christ every Easter because he's a convenient victim. Each of these paintings is a fresh and distinctive representation of my pessimism about where we are. I think we all have to fight our way out of a prison.

...I'm trying to use these forms as metaphors. I'm saying that society makes the inside of people like the outside of someone whose face is covered with hair and boils or whatever. I've been trying to improve the clarity of forms and the means of communications. Mine is art with an ulterior motive, that is to say that we, mainly the middle class - I've got a bee in my bonnet about them, they're the swine I rely on to buy my paintings - aren't so civilized as they think they are.<sup>26</sup>

While a very few of the institutional images have their compositional genesis within Fomison's imagination, most are drawn from photographic sources. But **There's Nothing Wrong with Me**, painted in mid 1971, was begun from a magazine clipping; the work is inscribed in

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<sup>26</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.12.

Fomison's characteristic spidery copperplate script "started from a photo A. Sala (Italy) in 'Life' magazine advert for Pentax cameras". This clipping was one of an enormous number that Fomison had amassed to use as a visual catalogue and catalyst for potential works. He had begun to collect the 'ready-made' images from his Art School years, co-opting family and friends to clip features of interest from local newspapers and magazines. He continued this practice in Europe, returning home with a selection of meticulously dated and documented scraps from English and French periodicals, supplemented by packets of clippings posted from New Zealand by his mother and sisters. The largely monochromatic images (news photographs, advertisements and postcard reproductions of famous paintings) were carefully collated into subject files, identified by theme - for example, 'Lazarus', 'Christ's Crucifixion' (although strangely Fomison never depicted Christ on the cross), 'Ventriloquists and Their Dummies' - which formed a vast and idiosyncratic personal visual library that remained close at hand in Fomison's studio until his death.

Fomison's care and meticulous approach towards the collection of his visual source material contrast oddly with the seemingly undisciplined vagaries of his personal life. The discipline and single-mindedness of his working practice sit uneasily with a comprehension of Fomison as an overtly Romantic artist figure, leading a bibulous, haphazard, whimsical existence without the structure of forced routine. It is almost as if Fomison led two lives: the one hard-working and dedicated, the other hard-living and wayward.

This seemingly fundamental dichotomy between disparate - and disintegrated - aspects of Fomison's personality is exemplified in his lifelong habits of writing notes to himself, again carefully filed within subject areas of interest. Almost as comfortable with a pen as with a paintbrush, Fomison wrote continuously - correspondence with friends

and family, the odd academic article for publication within archeological journals, diary entries, notes to himself as reminders of obligations undertaken or of events or meetings which had occurred - recording and documenting the passage of his life. (He also kept, until a few years before his death, a painting 'log' which recorded the conception and creation of each work - source, media, pigments, drying time, reworking - referring to each work before titling by its reference number.) Initially the personal notes were written with the traditional diaristic impulse of the first person form. A note dated 6 February 1969 begins: "On my way to Carlton Dealers below my old studio & stopped to inspect stock they have in the window of a shop they use for storage - & saw what for the street lights was an unusually clear picture of roses on the far side wall."<sup>27</sup> The rest of the note details the conclusive identification and purchase of a much cherished early 'naive' painting. A little after this date, however, the notes begin to take on the second person form, and it is almost as if another person takes over. Much of the text of verbal interviews with Fomison take this form. When recalling past events of his life, he frequently referred to himself as 'you'. Of his childhood hospitalization: "You weren't surrounded by people so you learned to watch"<sup>28</sup>, or of his early unsuccessful attempts with oils: "You'd get the forms right, then he'd want you to get the colour right through adding black and white".<sup>29</sup> The use of 'you' in such circumstances appears particularly odd. It seems, at times, to refer to a universal experience, including the interviewer in both the dialogue and the event, indicating an experience which can be understood at first hand by both parties. In these circumstances, the use of 'you' also provides a sense of dissociation from the realities of an

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<sup>27</sup>Fomison archives, Reference Room, School of Fine Arts, University of Canterbury.

<sup>28</sup>Denys Trussell, 'A Provincial Artist Talks of Religious Compassion', *City News*, 17 August 1976.

<sup>29</sup>Lara Strongman, op.cit.

unpleasant or embarrassing recollection. At other times, and especially within the context of the notes written by Fomison for later reference and for his eyes alone, 'you' almost seems to represent another person. To note the exact provenance of an ornament acquired for the house - date, location, cost, description - seems more than a little obsessive: if remembrance of these details was deemed necessary, the proximity of the object itself would surely form an aid to memory. It appears as though Fomison, perhaps under no illusions as to his mental state or to the inroads which prolonged drug and alcohol abuse were making into his remembrance of things past, wrote down the details as a letter to his future self - to the 'you' he would be at a different time and place. Referring in interviews to past events, 'you' becomes a device for distance: the 'you' of that time separate and distinct from the 'you' of the present. There is also the supposition that, towards the end of his life, Fomison's recollection of the events of his youth was increasingly hazy, and that what he recollected was the telling of the story on an earlier occasion than the life of the story itself. This is born out by the similar (and in some cases identical) phraseology which reoccurs when describing the same event from interview to interview. In this case 'you' acts as definition: 'I' cannot remember the happenings of that time with verisimilitude, but it is certain that 'you' were there and recorded the events as they happened: it is the recording by 'you' on which 'I' draw to tell the tale. This disjunction between aspects of the self, the 'I' and 'you', may perhaps be regarded less as dysfunction than a pragmatic survival: a lifebelt against loss in a sea of stormy memory.

Fomison's collection of photographic images may equally be considered an aspect of his diaristic impulse. The reproductions are tangible visual reminders of ideas which might otherwise sink without

trace in the ferment of a tumultuous mind. They stand as pictorial notes to the future self. However, Fomison was somewhat ambivalent to the art of photography itself. He stated in an interview six months before his death:

You could say that I'm a frustrated photographer. To the extent that right from when I was very young I used to hoard magazines for their photographs, for their visual imagery - and I did have a go at being a photographer at one stage when I was in London and I'd given up painting. I envied photography. I knew then, as I know now, that photography is the prominent visual medium. But I found that the sequence of events from taking a photograph and getting a developed print and getting it printed in a magazine and stuff was beyond my visionary means. And so I reluctantly went back to painting because it is a one-man media and I am no good at technology. I found that I was no good at developing and printing, also that I was no good at fronting the situations that I wanted to photograph. People in vulnerable situations. I felt that it was an intrusion on them, for a camera to be involved. so I went back to being a voyeur, remembering everything I'd seen. For instance... I was on a visit to the War Museum in London and this old street had-it<sup>30</sup> got flattened by a truck: under this overhead bridge. I was the first one on the scene. His head was misshapen by the impact of this passing truck that didn't stop. His arms were still fluttering. How can you photograph something like that? It's always in my memory.<sup>31</sup>

FROM 17 SEPTEMBER to 3 October 1971, Fomison held his first one-person exhibition for seven years. Described as "one of the South Island's best-known but least often seen painters"<sup>32</sup>, it appeared as if the provincial art establishment was determined to claim him as its own, a label which Fomison never refuted. Later, in another city, he spoke of the South with a sense of wistfulness tinged with awe, recalling his ramblings within its deserted places as a student of archeology:

...I didn't know I was being taught by the landscape. I didn't know I was

<sup>30</sup>Fomison was referring to a tramp or hobo, a man who lived in the streets.

<sup>31</sup>ibid.

<sup>32</sup>*The Press*, 31 September 1971.

learning. The first thing I began to notice was that my South Island was not the one being revealed in *Woman's Weekly*-type colour photographs. The South I knew lent form to my own feelings of light and darkness. The South wants it back, too. What I'm saying is, if I get old and senile enough I'll probably return there to die.<sup>33</sup>

Unlike his earlier exhibitions, there were comparatively few works included in the show at the CSA Gallery in 1971. While more sparse, the exhibition represented the work of five years, and included paintings completed in London which had travelled home with him in 1967. The exhibition was the first opportunity offered to provincial art circles to assess Fomison's new direction in a large body of work. Fomison, however, denied that his style had altered, suggesting instead that the visual difference between his recent work and the output of his time before his European trip was a matter of "a change in tactics, in the way in which technique is used."<sup>34</sup>

He described the new-found technique thus:

Whereas before black and earth colours were applied together on a white background, now the black is used first, to model forms, and a thin glaze of transparent colour is washed over after the black has dried. Common to both is the retention of white background for highlights.<sup>35</sup>

As an amalgam of five years work, the exhibition contained examples of the various subject series which had engaged Fomison's attention over that period. Among the works were religiously-based 'copies' - **St John the Baptist's Head brought in a plate to the Feast (after Caravaggio)** (1967), **Detail from Piero della Francesca's "The Resurrection"** (1970); medical illustrations - **Malaria Victim (New Guinea)** (1970), **Hairy Man of**

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<sup>33</sup>Denys Trussell, op.cit.

<sup>34</sup>*The Press*, 31 September 1971.

<sup>35</sup>ibid.

**Mandalay** (a.k.a. **Facial Hypertrichosis**) (1970) [Fig. 14], and **Carcinoma of the Tongue** (1971); and institutional images - **Nightmare Nut** (1971), **But there's nothing Wrong with Me** (1971), and **Mugshot** (1971) [Fig. 17], all taken from photographs of competitors in a 'gurning', or grotesque face-pulling, competition. There was even a self-portrait, Fomison's first, which, like the other paintings, was drawn from a photographic starting point - with typical perverseness, the source was not a photograph of Fomison. (The work is inscribed instead "commenced from a photograph of Colonel Rudolf Abel", and was produced while Fomison lived at 92c Riccarton Road with Philip Clairmont in 1969.)

Like other works in the exhibition, the self portrait is a darkly compelling image. The lower half of a man's face, twisted and harsh-featured, looms forward from enveloping blackness, striking the viewer with an indefinite sense of menace, eyes hooded in impenetrable black shadow. The artist's view of himself allows the onlooker little definite information. It presents a man of mystery, a dweller of the shadows, face thin-lipped, contorted and locked in the grip of harsh emotion, hewn out of stony silence - the eyes, as windows to the soul, shrouded in darkness. Not an easy image: like its subject, "not chosen for its drawing-room appeal".<sup>36</sup>

However, a number of works from the exhibition were sold, presumably becoming ornaments in their new owners' drawing-rooms. As with most aspects of the art process, Fomison had strongly developed and highly ambivalent feelings towards the sale of his work. The "bee in his bonnet" about the largely middle-class collectors who bought - and indeed, were able to buy - his works, led him to state: "I hope these paintings fester on their walls and they have to take them down and put them behind their piano... I hope the paintings get up and chase them

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<sup>36</sup>G.T.M., 'Dark Visions', *The Press*, 22 Sept 1971.



around the house."<sup>37</sup>

The reviews were mixed, the critics confining themselves largely to description. G. T[revor] M.[offat] in *The Press* examined Fomison's "revelation of the darker side of this world", commenting that "there is nothing pretty or decorative about Tony Fomison's paintings" upon themes which are "often extremely ugly and morbid". He added that Fomison preferred "to confront the world with its plight much as the camera does."<sup>38</sup> John Oakley, writing for *The Star*, described the "strange, unhappy" images as "at times compelling in their intensity, but often unpleasant". He identified Fomison's rationale as "the subjective approach of an introvert".<sup>39</sup> Tom Taylor, who had lectured in sculpture to Fomison, was more positive. He wrote:

Few one-man exhibitions match, in intense humanity, the paintings in Tony Fomison's current showing. The still light of the caves, where, some years ago, Fomison recorded so well the drawings of the migrant Maori, has stayed with him to become the emotional setting of his series of heads... Much of the subject matter is drawn from the camera image but the image's dry reportage does not persist against Fomison's heavy insight and dramatic intensification... The paintings are stygian gardens, so still as to be frightening, so hypnotic that one is drawn and drawn... [into] the artist's deliberate view of a Genet world of black comedy, Ubu-esque absurdity on the dark side of light. The paintings annihilate hope, make despair comic and pity ridiculous in the wilderness of men.<sup>40</sup>

The Society of Arts purchased **But There's nothing wrong with me** for its permanent collection: a farewell salute to Fomison, who had terminated his employment at the CSA a couple of months prior to the exhibition to work full-time on his painting. For a number of reasons,

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<sup>37</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.12.

<sup>38</sup>*The Press*, 22 September 1971.

<sup>39</sup>*The Star*, 28 September 1971.

<sup>40</sup>Taylor, T. 'The Dark Side of Light', *Arts and Community*, vol 7, no.11, November 1971, p.10.

leaving the security of paid employment was a brave decision for Fomison to make. It announced to the world at large that he considered himself a 'serious' artist: it was a position, which, for Fomison, that once affirmed, gave no quarter for back-sliding. Though enjoying increasing revenue from both public and private sales of his work, his current detailed and painstaking technique meant that unlike the earlier quick-fire brushy images, each painting took a considerable amount of time to produce. There was no guarantee of sale of a work which might have taken more than a month to complete.

Following his inclusion in 'Christchurch '71', a group show of several local artists which also included works by Philip Clairmont, at the New Vision Gallery in Auckland from 15-26 March 1971, Fomison worked towards a solo exhibition at the New Vision which was held in late April 1972. He exhibited 23 oil paintings and two pencil drawings, which ranged in price from \$40 to \$500. Like the CSA exhibition, the show surveyed Fomison's work of the last five to six years, supplemented by new works on the 'institutional' and 'old master' themes and other works not previously exhibited. A catalogue was produced for the exhibition, with details of works and a short biographical note in Fomison's crabbed copperplate, supplemented by black and white photographs by Mark Adams, an acquaintance from Christchurch. A substantial biographical-cum-critical summary of Fomison's work was prepared by Auckland art historian Michael Dunn for the April 1972 edition of *Artis*, the bi-monthly publication of the New Vision Gallery, which included a number of black and white reproductions of Fomison's recent work.

If the exhibition at the CSA the previous year had once and for all established Fomison's reputation as a dynamic artistic force within Christchurch, the New Vision show established the same premise for him in Auckland. The exhibition was well received by the Auckland art

establishment, who, while finding his "obsession...with death and aberration" a little difficult, noted the development of a formidable new talent. T.J.McNamara summarized the exhibition as "a singularly powerful and highly individual contribution to the realistic movement in New Zealand art"<sup>41</sup>, while *The Sunday Herald* commented that "he seems set to make an impression on the New Zealand Art scene", adding wryly "whether it will be a popular impression, though, is another question. Ugliness, however beautifully and powerfully it is painted, is not often a popular subject."<sup>42</sup>

One of the most powerful works from the exhibition, **A sort of Danse Macabre with Viet Nam in Mind** (1970-71), a small, beautifully rendered drawing begun from a photograph in *Life* magazine, revealed Fomison's fluency with the pencil. It was this work which perhaps in particular led him to be described as a 'realist'. He was quick to refute what he regarded as the pejorative connotations of contemporary realism, distancing himself from "the flat, empty work of the so-called super-realists in Auckland, super-ficial certainly"<sup>43</sup> in an article entitled 'Head Art' which he wrote for *Uncool* in 1972.

*Uncool* was an underground magazine briefly published in Christchurch, one of a rash of alternative comics and magazines with a heavily left-wing/anarchistic political bias which surfaced in the city during 1972-73. Fomison's continued association with University undergraduate circles - he accompanied School of Fine Art students and lecturers on several extra-curricular painting fieldtrips around the South Island over 1971-72 - and his prominence in the local art (and drugs) social scene meant that he was called upon several times for contributions to

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<sup>41</sup>T.J.McNamara, 'Emphasis on Death and The Macabre', *New Zealand Herald*, 17 April 1972.

<sup>42</sup>*The Sunday Herald*, 'Canadian paintings share mixed New Zealand bag', 23 April 1972.

<sup>43</sup>Tony Fomison, 'Head Art', *Uncool*, no. 1, 1972, n.p.

self-funded student (and more underground) publications. In 1972 he contributed a pencil drawing to *Shard*, an alternative capping magazine "dedicated to Change" edited by Gary Langsford, which also featured cartoons by Bill Hammond and Chris Grosz. A large photograph of Fomison by Mark Adams adorned the fold-out cover: he is pictured in deep shadow, his lined, craggy face like an Easter Island stone monolith. Further association with student publications came with the reproduction of 'HISSTORY redrawn as HER STORY', an illustration to mark Women's Liberation in *Canta*, the official newspaper of the Students' Association, and in a major article on Fomison's life and work to that point, written by Murray Horton, which appeared in *Canta* in February 1974.

Elsewhere, Fomison's work was seen in '30 Plus', a group exhibition at the Robert McDougall Art Gallery in 1971; at the Bosshard Gallery in Akaroa; at the Dawsons Exhibition Gallery in Dunedin, while eight works (*Copy of Head of Christ* by Morales (a.k.a. *Study of Head..*) (1969), *No!* (1969-71) [Fig. 10], *Paparua*, 1970 [Fig. 11], *From Cover of Time 18.1.71* (1971), *From a Photo of Cassius Clay* (1972), *From Holbein's Dead Christ* (1972), *Study for a Christ* (1972) and *Pencil Drawing* (1972)) were reproduced in *Landfall* in March 1973.

Fomison's association with *Uncool* and the later *Ferret* comics, run by politically active (though anonymous) editors, was a result of his involvement in underground politics, stirred to an anti-American and anti-establishment anarchistic fervour in Christchurch during the early seventies. At this time, Fomison also became involved with the politics of homosexuality, briefly establishing his living room at his house in Beveridge Street as a "Gay Lib library".<sup>44</sup> Through his friendship with peace campaigner Owen Wilkes and Political Science graduate Murray

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<sup>44</sup>Murray Horton, op. cit., p. 11.

Horton, a driving force in the alternative left-wing Progressive Youth Movement (PYM), Fomison became fiercely and actively involved in local protest politics. He travelled on the 'Intrepid Tours' bus to attend the 'Mount John demo' - a large, mobilized demonstration at and picket of the US 'spy' surveillance station in Canterbury. He attended a number of left-wing rallies and marches in the city, carrying head-turning placards designed and painted by himself. On one occasion his placard read: "Heads against the war - expand your head, don't shrink it, don't straighten your face, bend your head".<sup>45</sup>

The 'Heads' of his message had an undoubted double-meaning to the initiated, a word game upon which he expounded gleefully in his articles for *Uncool* and *Ferret*. In contemporary drug culture, the term 'head' referred to a committed drug user - the word suggesting both the mind-expanding properties of chemicals and the strength of the 'head' of the marijuana plant. For *Uncool*, Fomison discussed the politics of art-making, contrasting the force of individual imagination against the repression of artistic academia in a text illustrated with graphics by Phil Clairmont. Fomison wrote:

The graduate who thinks he learned painting at art school - his quest for his 'own style' seems to be the only reason he's painting for. Art for ego's arty sake. What you call dead-head art but not Head art. In Head art as you see it on overseas record covers and paperbacks, posters and underground press, is that imagination is the most important thing.<sup>46</sup>

'Hints on the House Training of your Head', which appeared in the third issue of *Ferret*<sup>47</sup>, expounded at length upon the theme of "living inside your own head" - in Fomison's vision, a house with an infinite

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<sup>45</sup>*ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>46</sup>Tony Fomison, *op.cit.*, n.p.

<sup>47</sup>Tony Fomison, 'Hints on the House Training of your Head', *Ferret*, no. 3, May 1973, n.p.

number of rooms in which "there are always new doors to open". With drugs as the key to open these doors of perception, Fomison advised that he was "talking to those who aren't afraid to take a trip indoors, and walk it around inside their own heads." His message carried a warning: "In the usual kiwi neighbourhood of quarter-aching, wooden-faced fronts, every pair of frontage windows is forever on the lookout for anyone different", cautioning the would-be 'Head' particularly against the destructive role of the psychiatrist ("...with his 'stoppers' and 'blockers' and electrical shocks, he'll lock you in, and walk away with your front door key in his white coat pocket... he has been confined to the basement of his consciousness all his life.") Fomison's writing was illustrated by blocked-in, one-colour decorative images reminiscent of the forms of Maori rock art, copies of the painted decoration which festooned his front door and windows at his house in Beveridge Street. [Fig. 17]

'More Unwanted Advice On Housing Your Head' was published in the December issue of *Ferret*<sup>48</sup>, and continued Fomison's anti-psychiatric diatribe. Drawing on deeply felt personal experience, he wrote:

It should have been just heaven, what with free grub; your washing done for you;  
TV in every ward - and all they expected of you in return was to talk about  
yourself all the time. But for a really hard-boiled Head none of this can break  
down that door lockable from the outside...

For a year prior to the publication of this article, Fomison had attended Princess Margaret Hospital as an outpatient, collecting a free prescription for methadone to control his addiction to hard drugs. This experience brought about his negative impression of psychiatry, which he increasingly regarded as the villain of the piece, distrusting psychiatric evaluation which categorized hard drug use and altered mental states as

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<sup>48</sup>Tony Fomison, 'More Unwanted Advice On Housing Your Head', *Ferret*, no. 4, December 1973, n.p.

'abnormal'. According to Fomison, he protested successfully against compulsory attendance at group therapy meetings at the hospital. While feeling that the analysis of psychiatrists had little to offer him, he was also wary of the temptation to which he would be subjected in an environment which exposed him to social contact with other 'Heads'. He commented:

It's not worth having a [drug] habit in a place like Christchurch because it's such a hassle to get the stuff. I believed that I painted better on heavy gear. I'm conditioning myself to believe that I paint better without it; it interferes with your self-critical faculty.<sup>49</sup>

Part of Fomison's self-imposed conditioning and aversion therapy involved immersion in a number of seminal works of twentieth century psychology. He read avidly, discovering in the writings of Carl Jung two helpful sets of ideas: the first, a non-judgemental understanding of mental illness as an alternative, rather than an abnormal, state of mind; secondly, a vindication of his own position on the significant relationship between art, culture, mythology and the visionary mind. As he had studied the achievements of art's great past masters, he turned his attention to the theories of the past greats of psychology, taking from his readings an understanding of the role of the mentally ill as visionaries with direct access to the cultural subconscious. He rejected Freud's "obsession with sex" in favour of Jung's "basic continuing inter-cultural truths".<sup>50</sup> He also dipped into the writings of Laing "to build up his self-respect".<sup>51</sup> This process of self-absorption and analysis was a momentous experience for Fomison. A voyage into the darker regions of the self, the locked box

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<sup>49</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p.11.

<sup>50</sup>Lara Strongman, op.cit.

<sup>51</sup>Murray Horton, op.cit., p. 11.

rooms of his house/head, punctuated by feverish work on his images of sad victims and supported by his methadone habit, this journey into introversion took several months to complete. Of this experience, Fomison later stated: "I had a trip into myself last year, a trip without the acid."<sup>52</sup>

Perceiving light at the end of the introspective tunnel into which he had withdrawn, Fomison made a significant decision: to move to Auckland, away from the hallucinogenic spectres of temptation and ease which haunted him in his home town. He announced this intention publicly in an introduction for his final article for *Ferret*, stating: "We're moving to Auckland and got alot [sic] of rubbish to leave behind, and I might as well leave some of it here."<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>ibid, p.11.

<sup>53</sup>Tony Fomison, 'More Unwanted Advice On Housing Your Head', *Ferret*, op.cit., n.p.



## CHAPTER FIVE

**AUCKLAND**  
**1973 - 1979**

IN AUCKLAND, FOMISON discovered a Polynesian city. He felt instantly at home in a culture both international and regional, a thriving, eclectic, disparate community balanced on the knife-edge of its place in the Pacific. Fomison's advent to Auckland was a homecoming of sorts, a continuation of the return journey he had made seven years before, when, as a refugee from his European conflict, he had washed up on the shores of his birthplace and withdrawn into its easy familiarity and seclusion. The move to Auckland became the final destination on the homeward journey - a voyage into the heart of the known, where the seemingly foreign ("shops... full of taro and signs in Polynesian languages"<sup>1</sup>) quickly became the habits of familiarity. Auckland, the crossing point and focus of the Pacific and European cultures which comprise New Zealand's ancestry, provided a home for Fomison, as, years before, the wild, un-European South Island landscape had fed and sheltered him. Over the next few years, Fomison's chosen home became populated by his adopted 'family', a network of close friends and supporters drawn from the local artistic, Samoan and Maori communities, people whose cultural contribution extended Fomison's work and were perhaps in turn extended by his images.

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<sup>1</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, exhibition catalogue, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1979, n.p.

SHORTLY AFTER HIS arrival in Auckland, Fomison moved into a run-down flat in Grafton Road, by the motorway. He re-established the contacts he had previously made among the local art scene, and began to attend exhibition openings and artists' parties. His original resolve to move to Auckland had been kindled through meetings with various 'Auckland' artists (such as Gretchen Albrecht<sup>2</sup> and Colin McCahon) who had passed through Christchurch and offered hospitality to Fomison should he travel north. A visit to Auckland over the summer of 1972-73 had confirmed his desire to leave Christchurch. Despite a nightmare journey north, winding through the travails of a self-induced purgatory which reflected his more desperate European experiences (a bleak incident out of Turangi, where Fomison, suffering from methadone withdrawal and wrapped in a pilfered tarpaulin, lay in a roadside ditch in the dark, too ill to flag down a ride himself<sup>3</sup>), he enjoyed the short time he spent in Auckland, the highlight of which was the French Gothic exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery. A friend recalls Fomison discussing the exhibits at length, his knowledge gained from his observations in France in 1965-66.<sup>4</sup>

Fomison's burgeoning reputation produced invitations to exhibit to include works in a large number of group exhibitions during the years 1973-74. He exhibited works in group shows at the Barry Lett Galleries in Auckland in January 1973 and January 1974, and in a solo exhibition in May/June 1974, having switched allegiance from the New Vision Gallery for his representation in the city. In Canterbury, works were included in group exhibitions at the Bosshard Gallery, Akaroa (1973); in the Centennial Exhibition by former students of the Canterbury School of Fine Arts at the Christchurch Town Hall (May 1973); and 'Art New Zealand '74'

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<sup>2</sup>Lara Strongman, interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

<sup>3</sup>Garth Cartwright, interview with Tony Fomison, 1986.

<sup>4</sup>Information given to the author by Ian Dalziel, 1989.

at the CSA Gallery which was organized to coincide with the city's hosting of the Commonwealth Games. The Manawatu Art Gallery invited him to contribute work to its 'Drawings Invitational' exhibition in 1973, while in September that year he was included in the 'Eight Young Artists' exhibition at the New Zealand Academy of Fine Arts in Wellington. In 1974 he exhibited with Philip Clairmont (who had moved to Waikanae the previous year with his family) and Benjamin Pitman (a recent graduate from the School of Fine Arts at the University of Auckland), in a show entitled 'Prospect' at the Bett-Duncan Studio Gallery in Wellington: the press release for this exhibition noted that Fomison was "becoming recognized as one of the major forces on the current art scene with his uncompromising portraits of humanity in extremis."<sup>5</sup> The review commented succinctly: "this man is good".<sup>6</sup>

The works which Fomison exhibited in 'Prospect' were, like those included in the other group shows at this time, drawn from his production of the first few years of the 1970s. Most of the works included in 'Prospect' had been previously exhibited. They stemmed largely from the institutional theme and were initiated from the second-hand experience of documentary photographs, depicting figures in various guises of suffering and bondage. While these works travelled the country, Fomison, in his new home, embarked on a new series of images.

These new works, emerging from the pure velvet darkness of the imagination, owed less to the harsh light of documentary and more to a sense of wistful mytho-poetic illumination. Images such as **Man Imploring the Tree of Life** (1973-74) grew out, perhaps, in part from Fomison's awareness of his multicultural environment. The resonances of an undefined Pacific/Maori mythology reverberate throughout this

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<sup>5</sup>Three Young Artists in 'Prospect' Show', unreferenced newspaper clipping, Mrs T. Clairmont.

<sup>6</sup>Stephen Green, 'Fomison, Clairmont, Pitman at the Bett-Duncan Gallery', unreferenced newspaper clipping, Mrs T. Clairmont.

work, in which a small homunculus leans with an imploring gesture towards two immense, vaguely female, lunar visages, living faces carved into a massive tree trunk which extends above and below the picture's boundaries. A scene illustrating a passage from the mythology of a Jungian collective unconscious rather than allied to a particular cultural identity, **Man Imploring the Tree of Life** provides the intellectual genesis for the more specifically Maori/Polynesian derivation of works from 1975-77.

Fomison's paintings of the mid-seventies stand as illustrations of his (by then) extensive knowledge of the histories, myths and dream-images of New Zealand culture. By comparison, the Maori-related subject matter of his semi-portrait 'brushy' works of the early 1960s appears shallow and tentative - a formal gesture rather than an embrace of feeling. The paintings of the mid-seventies are informed by Fomison's immersion in Maori culture and in turn attempt to inform the culture to which they belong. Their function is narrative, symbols of the dialogue which Maori art involves between the past and future as living passages of the present. Penetrating beyond the adoption of the gestures of Maori symbology as decorative elements within the structure of modernist painting (of which Gordon Walters's *koru* motifs are an example), Fomison attempted to construct repositories of deeply felt meaning which then assume their own place within the culture. Rather than plundering the storehouses of indigenous culture, the works move towards a sense of adding their own cultural wealth to the environment from which they grow - an art of symbiosis.

Fomison's mid-seventies works can be viewed as history paintings - in the Maori understanding of omnipresent time rather than as the European backward-facing and forgotten past. The images portray both

'real' historical characters - Omai, Te Whiti, Wiremu Ratana - and those mystical nameless figures not anchored in time, spirits of the land and its people. Images of quests and mysteries abound, secrets and ciphers, shadows peeling away from Fomison's imagination like layers of an onion: a personal mythology populated by dark, ur-faced guardian figures moving through the ancestral generations. Small homunculus figures begin to appear in his work at this time, representative of the human spirit in its relationship with the immense forces present in the landscape, seen in works such as *Hey, moon dreamer* (1976). [Fig. 20] The most successful of these new paintings which reflect elements of Fomison's evolving personal iconography (*The Handing On, The Open Window*, both painted in 1976) are images of genuine strength of feeling generated both within and without of the paintings. Transcendental, they combine a sculptural sense of deep telluric unease with a metaphysical import.

Dealing with the subject matter of cultural disquiet is a problematic enterprise: Fomison's output at this time is marked by a number of less successful works, such as *Omai* (1977) or *The Man of Peace and the Man of War (Te Whiti and Titokowaru)* (1980) [Fig. 27] in which his ongoing difficulty with the composition of figures within a group can be noted. Other works suffer through employment of heavy-handed mannerisms: an example of this is *For his thoughts on death is the pilgrim's way, Barred by this Guardian of the shore* (1976) where the horned skull of the weighty guardian figure appears less culturally profound than naively humorous. (Fomison himself later referred to these 'horned' works as "heavy metal" paintings.)<sup>7</sup>

Like the earlier works begun from monochromatic photographs, the figures in the new paintings are described in stage-lit chiaroscuro, points of light picked out in velvet darkness, seen in his *Christ* of 1976. [Fig. 19] In

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<sup>7</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', *Art New Zealand*, no. 52, Spring 1989, p. 68.

many of the images, however, a new departure is apparent in the inclusion of landscape as a background to the figural compositions. The landscapes refer to both dream and reality: sharply defined horizon lines create dramatic contrasts between the earth and sky; dawn breaks with a magnesium flash against dark clouds; rolling hills appear as contours of a giant anthropomorphic form... a landscape of the spirit, a Salvator Rosa-esque environment of symbolic elemental forces in which perhaps may be recognized the raw coastlines and dramatic skies of New Zealand. Anchored in reality and yet filtered through the gauze of mysticism, Fomison's landscapes become charged with emotional content and spiritual significance akin to Colin McCahon's perception of religious consciousness in the land. Whereas McCahon's spirituality is expressed through a starting point of Christian convention, Fomison's is rooted more nebulously in equal parts of Maori history and unabashed pantheism. McCahon wrote in 1972 of his work **Takaka: Night and Day** (1948) that the images "state my interest in landscape as a symbol of place and also of the human condition."<sup>8</sup>: this applies to Fomison's images of the land also, with their ruggedly New Zealand flavour, Romantic grandeur juxtaposed against, yet inexorably linked to, the scratchings and stories of humanity.

While Fomison's landscape painting was influenced by time spent on the West Coast of the North Island after his move to Auckland (a knowledge of the land seen in works such as **Not Just Another Picnic** and **Little Girl Picking Flowers In A Paddock**<sup>9</sup>, and earlier works such as **Beachscape, sand and rocks** and **Dawn, sea-cave, tide out** from 1976, and **Sea cavern**, 1977), the wildness of the South Island landscape remained strong in his memory. In August 1976, after the opening of a major solo

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<sup>8</sup>Auckland City Art Gallery, *Colin Mc Cahon: A Survey Exhibition*, 1972 p. 28.

<sup>9</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', op.cit., p67.

exhibition at Barry Lett Gallery of images painted in Auckland, Denys Trussell questioned Fomison on the background of both the paintings and the painter. Asked if the South Island landscape encouraged the emergence of a religious consciousness, Fomison commented :

You compare the weather of Canterbury with that of Auckland. It's big and dramatic: a kind of good and evil battle between Nor'Westerly and Sou'Westerly wind systems. Each lasts for long stable stretches, and contrasts strongly with the other. The same with the topography: a dramatic change from plain to mountain. This dramatic contrast reminds you of the main issues: the ones of good and evil; not just the issue of owning a multi-coloured bach at the Bay of Islands. Auckland and Northland call to you a kind of hedonism not very conducive to a religious consciousness.<sup>10</sup>

In 1976 Fomison painted **Ah South Island your music remembers me**, in which a sculpturally conceived Polynesian 'guardian' figure plays on a flute in front of a desolate landscape. This work reveals Fomison looking to the South Island of his youth, to the barren landscapes and dramatic skies of Banks Peninsula and South Canterbury. That the South Island was never far from his mind Fomison made evident in 1979, in the introduction to an exhibition at the Dowse Art Gallery. He wrote:

I came from the South Island, and the South Island I must mention! Yes your mountains still pile up on my thoughts! Your shorelines still run round edges of same. Big canoe of Maui, my little paddle will always be at your side!<sup>11</sup>

For Fomison, a consciousness of religion (or spirituality) was grounded within an appreciation of absolutes. The dramatic contrasts of the landscape, plain set against mountain, sea against sky, calm following storm, were a set of absolutes redolent of spirituality - the symbolic stage

<sup>10</sup>Denys Trussell, 'A Provincial Artist Talks of Religious Compassion', *City News*, 17 Aug 1976.

<sup>11</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, op. cit., n.p.

setting for a monumental battle between elemental forces of good and evil, or light and dark; scenery which takes on the character of its players. This connection between religion, landscape, and the relation of opposites is particularly reflected in the titles which Fomison gave to many of his works. Titles such as **Night and Day II** (1989) and **Question and Answer (The Tree of Life )** (1989) [Fig. 40] bring into play the tension of opposites within the image. A dynamic is created whereby the elements in opposition battle against one another for supremacy: the battle is a question without answer, the right hand against the left, a fact of nature. The duality of the problem posed in turn suggests the duality of Fomison's own mercurial nature.

While he stamped the print of personal symbolism on his depictions of the New Zealand landscape, Fomison developed a similarly idiosyncratic iconology based on his treatment of the figure. Apart from the ur-faced guardian figures reminiscent of heavy Polynesian sculptural types which appear in his work from the mid 1970's, his canvasses are peopled by a strange medley of prophets, pilgrims, and fools, archetypal representations in search for self, questers and questioners.

The Fool, as a symbol of truth telling, and, like a Tarot Hangman, standing for death, is recurrent in Fomison's work from the mid-seventies onwards, in images such as **What Shall We Tell Them** (1975-6) and **The Jester** (1977) [Fig. 21]. The latter work depicts an inscrutable face in murky chiaroscuro, flanked by two smaller heads. This jester is the Fool of Shakespeare - the all-seeing, all-knowing, untouched and untouchable clown with the ear and confidence of the king, his political advisor and fortune teller. For Fomison, the role of the Fool and the painter merged in shared functions as soothsayers and tellers of unpalatable truths. He frequently depicted the Fool character as the largest and most powerful figure within the composition, the painting's other figures like dwarf



puppets controlled by the master. *The End in Hand* (1976) [Fig. 22] belongs to this series of work. In this painting, an immense, implacably smiling jester/guardian figure holds a tiny severed head in its outstretched hand. The title of the work is a pun, but the overall impression of the image is one of unease and disquiet at the machinations of the central figure.

Images of mazes and labyrinths also begin to appear in Fomison's work from this time. As symbols of containment and entrapment, the maze paintings replace the earlier images of figures caught behind bars, suggesting a self-imposed imprisonment rather than one brought about through the agency of exterior forces. Appearing throughout cultures and ages as a decorative, semi-mystical symbol, the maze becomes another thread upon which Fomison plays in the web of Jungian collective unconsciousness. *In the maze; whose mask is this?* (1977) is a more abstract and less figurative image than many of Fomison's works from these years. In this work, a small, improbably long-necked bodiless head glimmers up from the base of the frame, features distorted and flattened, side-lit in uncompromising chiaroscuro. Its gaze is directed above, to a rhomboid shaped patch of light which cuts the darkness surrounding it: a being in a dark labyrinth of its own invention, unattainable light from a higher world visible but not strong enough to illuminate the darkness below: the maze/cave a prison, a protection, a tomb, a death.

While producing images symbolic of the search for self through an increasingly developed personal iconography, Fomison continued his journey towards self-enlightenment through a series of self-portraits in 1977-78. His first self-portrait, painted in 1969, was worked, as previously noted, from a photograph of someone else: the later images are painted from life. *Sidelighting* (1977) ravages Fomison's face in savage chiaroscuro. In 3/4 profile, he appears calm, though tense, a muscle

pulsing in a hollowed cheek : his nose eaten away to the skull by shadow in the manner of the figure in his *Tangi for Mururoa Atoll* drawings of 1973-74. In *Blue Self Portrait* (1977), he confronts the viewer, face thrusting forward out of the picture frame, brow furrowed, eyes fixed, mouth open in angry speech. Another self-portrait from the same year, once owned by Philip Clairmont, is a tiny tondo, calmer and more reflective than the larger images. It is a study of Fomison's face, his head truncated by the circular composition, worked in motley chiaroscuro and reminiscent in mood of self portraits by Rembrandt and Goya. A further *Self Portrait* from the following year, 1978 [Fig. 22], portrays the artist as a ravening figure, half beast, half human, lurking behind a closed window.

Another small tondo which can be related to Fomison's self portraits is his spiritually atavistic *Portrait of St Anthony*, also from 1977, a benign, moon-faced, image of his same saint. Fomison may have perceived some spiritual connection between his life and St Anthony's existence as an ascetic visionary, a wild man of the desert, tormented mercilessly by demons and on occasion subject to erotic visions. In 1979, Fomison wrote: "so far, I have only depicted St Anthony, and not the horrors that his name is heir to"<sup>12</sup>, a comment which may be understood as a suggestion that Fomison himself felt marked from birth by the legacy of his namesake.

The self-portraits of 1977, while on the one hand concerned with personal revelation and self discovery are on the other confirmations of the ego's place within the painter's images. They symbolize Fomison's growing confidence in his ability as an artist - a consolidation of his art and life, they mark a determination to portray something of himself at a certain time, in a certain mood, and affirm a positive mood lacking at the time of his first self portrait in 1969. The confidence required to produce

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<sup>12</sup> *ibid.*

these works was brought about in a small part by the growing success in his public career as an artist.

1976 had been a productive year for Fomison. As well as producing a great deal of new work, he became a finalist in the travelling Benson and Hedges Art Award competition, with his **In the Maze, Let each Decide, Yes, let each decide; Advice from her Ancestress** (c.1973-4) was included in 'N.Z. Drawing 1976' at the Auckland City Art Gallery; he contributed work to an exhibition entitled 'Behind the Eye' in Whangarei, organized by the potter Yvonne Rust; he held a major solo exhibition of recent work at the Barry Lett Gallery which was critically well received. Denys Trussell, reviewing for the *City News*, wrote that Fomison had "created an iconography of his own: an iconography sufficiently coherent to have meaning for us in this time and place";<sup>13</sup> while T.J. McNamara commented for the *New Zealand Herald* that the exhibition "makes Tony Fomison one of our most prominent painters."<sup>14</sup> The confidence and status engendered by such public statements, backed up by good sales, and, in the following year, 1977, a full-length feature article in *Art New Zealand*, must have been considerable for Fomison. A decade after his ignominious return from Europe, he had achieved professional success in his own country, gaining widespread respect and recognition within the artistic establishment for his work. This was recognized publicly in 1977, when he was presented with a special fellowship from the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council "in recognition of a substantial period of distinguished service to the arts in New Zealand".<sup>15</sup>

He was actively sought out by art dealers and gallery owners for

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<sup>13</sup>Denys Trussell, 'Imagery for all', *City News*, 3 August 1976.

<sup>14</sup>T.J. McNamara, 'Imagination in exhibition', *New Zealand Herald*, 2 August 1976.

<sup>15</sup>'Honoured for Work in Arts', *New Zealand Herald*, 25 January 1977. (Gordon H. Brown, director of the Sarjeant Gallery, Wanganui, was the other recipient.)

exhibitions throughout the last years of the 1970s. He showed his work at the Bosshard Galleries in Dunedin with sculpture by Llew Summers in July 1977; in September he exhibited at the Barry Lett Galleries in Auckland; the following month he held an exhibition at the Brooke/Gifford Gallery in Christchurch, again with Summers. Work by Fomison was included in the 'Six Figurative Painters' exhibition at the Barry Lett Galleries in April 1978; in June he showed with Clairmont and Gretchen Albrecht at the Elva Bett Gallery in Wellington; he held a major solo exhibition at Elva Bett's in November/December the same year. Clairmont and Fomison were the Elva Bett Gallery's most important and significant artists at this time. Bett had met the two painters several years before, on a trip south to Christchurch. Of this encounter, Bett stated; "...all the way home I was thinking I'd like to put Tony Fomison on the walls, his paintings were so hard and harsh and full of excitement."<sup>16</sup> Fomison built up a strong working relationship with his dealers, and in their company, appeared to be riding a rising tide of success in the late 1970s, the sales from the exhibitions vindicating his earlier decision to take a drop in his standard of living and devote himself to a career as an artist.

Though leading as frenetic a social life as ever in Auckland, a great deal of hard work and a highly developed sense of professionalism characterised Fomison's input into the production of his images. The purchase of an old two storey house at 17 Chamberlain Street in the predominantly Polynesian suburb of Ponsonby provided both the 'home base' so essential to Fomison and a place of industry: a studio working place sacrosanct to Fomison, with a "note on the door in thin spidery writing. Its tone is firm but polite: 'please phone before coming round. Thank you.'"<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Prue Dashfield, 'Art takes Elva Bett's breath away', *The Dominion*, 6 December 1984.

<sup>17</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *New Zealand Painters*, vol. 1, A-M, Alister Taylor, Martinborough, 1980, p.70

Living alone and painting fulltime, Fomison's environment was precisely ordered to personal convenience and idiosyncrasy. Walls and surfaces of his house were arrayed with the combings of a dozen junk shops; egg cups; circular bread boards (an obsession which he shared with James K. Baxter)<sup>18</sup>, wire meat covers, wooden teapot stands; religious trinkets, Maori artefacts, naive early New Zealand paintings rescued from flyblown obscurity: the detritus of a culture, arranged with museological care and authority. Fomison's collections were another manifestation of his concern for the 'underdog', an open display of artefacts popularly considered to be in poor taste. The naive paintings testified to a honesty and directness of vision which Fomison particularly valued. The effect of the collections, in the dark rooms of the Chamberlain Street house, was almost Victorian: the eclectic, carefully considered gatherings of a traveller home from the sea.<sup>19</sup> [see Fig. 36] The studio upstairs, chosen for its better lighting, was organized with professional precision. "Easels [were] placed for optimum light with completed and near completed works neatly stacked against the white walls".<sup>20</sup>

This sense of order and exactitude was also reflected in Fomison's working methods. In chronological order of completion, each painting was carefully numbered on the verso side and its details entered into a painting log, a practice Fomison continued until the mid 1980s. The log contained information relating to pigments, solvents, drying times, glazes and the development of the image, which frequently went through a number of changes before completion to Fomison's satisfaction. Application of painstaking layers of paint and lengthy drying times meant that Fomison frequently worked on several paintings both large and small, at once: the log served as an aide-memoire, to combat both

<sup>18</sup>see Baxter's *The Iron Breadboard* series of poems, 1956-57.

<sup>19</sup>see; Jim & Mary Barr, *New Zealand Painters*, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>20</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, op. cit., n.p.

Fomison's failing memory (the effects of years of hard living taking their toll) and as a long term reminder of specific individual processes, should an image need to be reworked at a future date. Like a ship's log or travel journal, the painting log-book recorded incidents along the journey of the image's production: the canvasses revealed as a living stage, where "figures are introduced, sit uneasily for a few days, and are escorted off with the aid of more paint and a new composition."<sup>21</sup>

As Fomison's confidence in the success of images generated from his imagination increased, his feelings towards his works became at once more personal and more relaxed. He discussed his work in anthropomorphic terms, giving the paintings life independent from their creator. Of the log numbers assigned to the works, he commented: "The paintings have got used to these numbers. They'd rather me use a number than a premature title shoved on them. They know I don't mean it."<sup>22</sup> Elsewhere he commented that "paintings turn their eyes upwards to clear the smoke" in his studio,<sup>23</sup> and that he had developed a new habit of placing reliance "on what my brushes tell me."<sup>24</sup>

The exhibition at the Bosshard Galleries in Dunedin during July 1977 revealed in a public context Fomison's habit of assigning log-book numbers to his work. Of the 47 paintings exhibited, thirteen were untitled, relying on their numbers for identification. The catalogued numbers from this exhibition form an index for gauging Fomison's output of the 1970s. By 1974, he had completed 84 works since he began his numbering system in 1969; he produced approximately 30 works in 1975; from the beginning of 1976 until July 1977 he had finished and

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<sup>21</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *New Zealand Painters*, op.cit., p. 74.

<sup>22</sup>ibid, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup>Elva Bett *Gallery Newsletter*, no. 77, October 1979, n.p.

<sup>24</sup>James Ross, 'A Singular Vision', *Art New Zealand*, , 1979, p. 21.

numbered in the vicinity of seventy works. While this increase in the rate at which he painted is correlated to his new life in Auckland as a full-time artist, free from the demands of other employment, it may also be attributed in part to the freedom in the subject matter of his imagery from the mid-1970s. Released from the painstaking copying of images in reproduction, he raced through the new images which tumbled from his imagination, feverishly setting them down in a period of strenuous activity.

As Fomison's fifteen-year apprenticeship with the appropriation of found images in his work drew to a close in the mid 'seventies, the new freedom of works drawn from the imagination transferred itself to his palette. Whereas previously colour had been sparingly applied to large areas of monochromatic chiaroscuro, canvasses darkly pre-painted and lighter pigments washed over in painstaking glazes, from about 1976 Fomison tended to abandon the practice of using black paint directly from the tube to begin his images "for the risky favour of using colour right from the start."<sup>25</sup> Work no. 168 in his log book, **River Terrace** (1976), was his first "all-colour" painting<sup>26</sup>. **Hey, moon dreamer** (1976) [Fig. 20] reveals the light background and more colourful pigmentation of the new paintings. This new found use of colour may also be attributed to the positive light in which Fomison increasingly regarded his work. The monochromatic tonings of the earlier paintings, though incidentally successful in their own right, grew out of a lack of confidence on two parts: the first, the use of found images rather than images found in the imagination, taken from black-and-white reproductions of both historical paintings and documentary photographs: the second, a legacy from Fomison's failures with oil paint at art school, where the addition of

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<sup>25</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, op.cit., n.p.

<sup>26</sup>Information in typed catalogue list, Bosshard Galleries, Dunedin, n.d. [July 1977].

colour served only to muddy the crisp edges of form.

In the catalogue to 'Six Figurative Painters', a major exhibition at the Barry Lett Galleries in April 1978, Fomison made a rare statement concerning the technique he had developed to produce his new images. He wrote:

I paint on hessian and canvas because the paintings need the texture to grade their washes on, a bit like watercolour painting does. Since they don't use added white, but rely on the white background of the prepared canvas - again, say, like watercolour technique relies on white paper - they need a medium that will stay wet till the tones are finalized, so I have to use oils. Any tube-given black used to do to peg out the forms with; overpainting in transparent colours followed when the black was dry. But now I'll often underpaint with an earth red, turning it into tone with the following colours. The other thing is, that I am trying to develop the compositions. I want to work on a larger size without simply scaling up little paintings. I would like to extend their field of vision and make them contain more.<sup>27</sup>

The impulse to produce works on a large scale obsessed Fomison for years. While many of his works of the late 1970s are a great deal larger than his previous images, they were still produced and conceived on a domestic scale, unlike the painting of his friend Colin McCahon, who had produced enormous, mural-scaled works in panels challenging to exhibit even in the large spaces of an art gallery.

There were many motives behind Fomison's desire to produce large-scale works. The first was that of pride and achievement: having overcome earlier difficulties with the use of colour in his painting, the stumbling block of scale Fomison first encountered at art school presented itself as a challenge. A second motive concerned the painting's audience. Fomison commented in a 1978 interview: "Painting large to any painter appeals just like having a publisher who prints a larger book to a writer...

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<sup>27</sup>*Six Figurative Painters*, exhibition catalogue, Barry Lett Galleries, Wellington, n.d. (April 1978), n.p. (The exhibition also included work by Nigel Brown, Philip Clairmont, John Parker, James Ross, and Jeffrey Harris.)



But not all painters' capabilities are towards the large and I'm struggling."<sup>28</sup> Several works, including the Benson and Hedges finalist **In the Maze, Let each Decide, Yes, let each decide** (1976), were painted out and reworked at this time due to deficiencies of scale and composition which Fomison perceived in them. He admitted reluctantly "that with these smaller ones I've been doing it has been easier to try things out. To do bigger paintings than you have ever done in your life before the pressure is on you to a greater extent to imitate another work rather than do a new one."<sup>29</sup> Elsewhere he commented that the works currently under production were "details and studies looking towards the day when I have the compositional means to do the mural-sized apocalyptical works that it is my ambition to do."<sup>30</sup> Despite setbacks, Fomison persevered with his large-scale ambitions, mentioning in a newspaper interview in 1979 that: "the pictures are telling me... that I have been painting too small. They're like people in a window. My ambition is to do murals, which are not so crowded."<sup>31</sup>

Yet another motive behind Fomison's desire to produce large works involved a quasi-political ambition. At the opening of a major exhibition in 1979, recognizing various influential political and business figures in the crowd, he took the opportunity to berate his audience regarding public patronage of the arts. He commented that small works, purchased by private individuals, were only available for viewing by the immediate social circle of the buyer: large scale public murals, funded by public money, could be owned by and be available to all.<sup>32</sup> By 1980, Fomison had convinced himself that his destiny lay in the politics of the large scale. He

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<sup>28</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, interview with Tony Fomison, 1978.

<sup>29</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *New Zealand Painters*, op. cit., p. 74.

<sup>30</sup>John Roberts, 'Private Imaginings', *New Zealand Listener*, 12 January 1980, p.16.

<sup>31</sup>*The Hutt News*, 24 October 1979.

<sup>32</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

stated: "Murals are what I am intended for. The large public communication is the original intention of painting."<sup>33</sup>

The exhibition at which Fomison spoke in 1979 was his most public achievement of the 1970s, an affirmation of his status and place within the development of New Zealand art and culture. Organized by Jim and Mary Barr for the Dowse Art Gallery in Lower Hutt, the exhibition included more than sixty works spanning fifteen years of output, a major retrospective survey which toured the public art institutions of the entire country. An exhibition of Fomison's recent work at the Elva Bett Gallery, opening in October 1979, ran concurrently with the large survey show: when the touring exhibition reached its Auckland venue the following year, the Denis Cohn Gallery mounted a complementary showing, while Christchurch audiences had been exposed to Fomison's recent work at the CSA Gallery in July 1979. Fomison attended the opening of the exhibition in Christchurch in person, writing as an introduction:

Those of us who move away and come up to Auckland, we get to hear the things they say about us back home. How we're still nuts, how we live in galleries' pockets (the better to be where the money is) - how we sell off painted bits of the South Island for personal gain... and how we have left the canoe half empty... But what the heck I'm coming down for the show, and I mustn't forget to bring my paddle.<sup>34</sup>

A comprehensive catalogue was produced for the survey exhibition at the Dowse, with commentary by Fomison and writing concerning his idiosyncratic personal history, information gained from lengthy personal interviews. In this text, Fomison was portrayed as an oddity concerned with the stories and history of his own land with an odd history of his own making to tell: both histories, the large and the small,

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<sup>33</sup>*The Auckland Star*, 12 November 1980.

<sup>34</sup>*News*, Journal of the Canterbury Society of Arts, no. 86, July-September 1979.

indistinguishably linked within the images on display.

The mounting of the exhibition was an enormous undertaking for a small provincial art institution. As the works travelled the country, reactions, though generally favourable, were sometimes mixed. In Auckland, T.J. McNamara described the exhibition as an impressive journey into the recesses of the mind<sup>35</sup>; in Hamilton G.E. Fairburn found it "not a pretty sight", but added "..when the current market for grotesques is satisfied and he makes a closer contact with reality, his painting could develop much more interestingly"<sup>36</sup>; Peter Leech in Dunedin detected "a chill sense of gloom... counted [as] an aesthetic virtue"<sup>37</sup>; while also in Dunedin, Peter Entwistle "didn't find much to get excited about... the prominent position, travel grants, reviews and a buying public notwithstanding."<sup>38</sup> In Christchurch, John Coley provided a sympathetic personal background to his review of the exhibition, regarding Fomison's painting as "a strong, direct way of communicating with others", though questioning: "What is responsible for its chilling, eerie vision?"<sup>39</sup>

Critical difficulties aside, the volume, scope, and indeed, the actual existence of the exhibition itself affirmed the growing perception of Fomison's unshakable significance, and, in its retrospective quality, his permanence, within the context of New Zealand art history. Without setting him within the common art historical context of the relationship of his images to those of his local contemporaries, or even within the internationalist tradition of modernist painting, Jim and Mary Barr, with full co-operation from Fomison, set out a unique position where the singularity of the artist's vision is all: the story of a personal journey,

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<sup>35</sup>T.J. McNamara, 'Print-maker's Art Gaining a Wider Appeal', *New Zealand Herald*, 17 November 1980.

<sup>36</sup>G.E. Fairburn, 'Not a pretty sight...', *The Waikato Times*, 12 May 1980.

<sup>37</sup>Peter Leech, 'Art in human desolation', *Otago Daily Times*, 21 July 1980.

<sup>38</sup>Peter Entwistle, 'Fomison exhibition succeeds at times', *The Dunedin Star*, 12 July 1980.

<sup>39</sup>John Coley, 'Pain and Private Demons', *The Christchurch Star*, 1 October 1980.

informed by the land and the spirit. The dedication and persistence of two decades of often bitter experience had reached fruition in the guise of public success under the gaze of his own country: the place of his birth and the passion of his adult life.

## CHAPTER SIX

# AUCKLAND

## 1979 - 1990

IN 1978 FOMISON produced one of his most powerful and memorable images, an unnamed work known simply as **Untitled no. 208**. [Fig. 23] The dispassionate anonymity of the log book title is reflected in the painting itself, which depicts the head of an unidentified black man, eyes blindfolded in white cloth, lips drawn away from his teeth in a rictus of fear and tension. At the base of the composition, the dark musculature of the man's neck is set off by the white folds of a collar edging a black shirt, a combination easily recognizable in New Zealand idiom as the jersey of its representative rugby players. An enigma, typical of Fomison's semi-narrative painting is posed in this work: a blindfold over the eyes of a frightened man suggests his imminent death by firing squad, yet the motive behind the execution of a presumably Polynesian All Black is unclear. The bandage over the figure's eyes thus takes on a metaphysical quality, his blindness the self-imposed protection against the unpalatable nature of reality, which nevertheless penetrates through the blindfold to create a sense of fearful unease.

Like all of Fomison's successful works from this time, **Untitled no. 208** is redolent with meaning, yet is unable to be deciphered with any sense of certitude. The viewer is instead forced to enter into a dialogue with the work, extracting from it a personal significance. While it is true of any work of art that its meaning is never constant, as communication between

disparate individuals with unique sets of experiences, the political-cum-philosophical stance behind this image invites the comments of personal conviction from its audience. Though a definitive exposition of the meaning of **Untitled no. 208** is fugitive, Fomison's stance on its implications was clear: of the work, he stated succinctly: "Football holds a day-bright candle to our own, homegrown racism."<sup>1</sup>

**Untitled no. 208** stands as a portent of Fomison's activities of 1981-82. The combination of naked fear, blindness, and a dark skin with the uniform of rugby, prefigured the nationwide upheavals of the Springbok Tour in 1981: conflict in which Fomison became deeply and uncompromisingly involved.

Though small in stature, physically weak and frequently in poor health, Fomison threw himself into the protest movement against the tour of New Zealand by the South African rugby team to the full extent of his mental and physical powers. Like the anti-US demonstrations in Christchurch of a decade earlier, the political motivations of the protesters were backed up by the association with a social scene: close friends of Fomison's such as Alan Maddox (and briefly, Philip Clairmont) and many of his Samoan and Maori friends and acquaintances were involved with him in the planning and fighting of the Auckland outbreak of a minor civil war - a war of conscience, fought without fatalities and with limited weaponry. Wearing 'armour' made from plastic buckets lined with foam rubber and carrying a shield, Fomison underwent training with the defensive Biko Squad. With the Squad, Fomison met massed ranks of baton-wielding police in hand-to-hand combat outside rugby grounds in Auckland in an attempt to force cancellation of the Tour, which for Fomison represented New Zealand's condonement of South Africa's

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<sup>1</sup>Jim & Mary Barr, *Tony Fomison: A Survey*, exhibition catalogue, Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt, 1979, n.p.

oppressive and discriminatory apartheid regime. Street-fighting with Biko Squad, though somewhat exhilarating after the event, was desperately exhausting and physically dangerous at the time. In a letter to his comrade-in-politics Murray Horton in Christchurch, Fomison wrote:

...we didn't have a chance without weapons, which we were clear on not carrying... but we had a good go, saw more than one of our opponents in tears towards then end. I got bowled over a few times - I remember pushing one cop back with a boot to the balls; watching his face while I did it: no damage, he was wearing the same protector that we were.<sup>2</sup>

With the Springbok Tour as the focus, 1981 was a political year for Fomison. He contributed works to several charity art auctions, with political or social beneficiaries, including the Devonport Art Auction in March and an auction organized for the MOST defence fund in November. His **Painting to Mark 21 Years of Amnesty International** (1981), a portrayal of a dark face imprisoned behind steel bars very reminiscent of his other 'cell' paintings from the mid-1970s, was included in the 'Amnesty International Exhibition of Works by Invited Artists' at the New Vision Gallery in October; in November he contributed **Te Whiti O Rongomai ae he Tohu Pai** to an auction at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery in New Plymouth, the proceeds of which were to go towards the establishment of an art trust at Parihaka, the focus of Maori land wars in Taranaki during the 1880s; while another small work, **Captain Ahab peg legged hunter of the white whale** (1981) [Fig. 28] was donated to New Zealand's Telethon to benefit the Year of the Disabled.

While concerned primarily with the politics of his own country, on occasion Fomison extended his political commentary beyond New Zealand's shores. When in 1981, works by Fomison and Clairmont were selected to travel to Cagnes-sur-Mer in France for inclusion in the

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<sup>2</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 13 October 1981.

International Festival of Painting, Fomison justified his participation (and the \$1000 fee with which he reduced the mortgage on the house in Chamberlain Street) by deciding to "use every media request on the subject of the show to berate the Frenchies' Pacific policies."<sup>3</sup>

Elsewhere, Fomison's attitude to French nuclear involvement in the Pacific surfaces in the subject matter of his work. A portrait of **Giscard d'Estaing - "Jester to the Modern Court of France"** marries concern about the effects of nuclear testing at Moruroa Atoll with Fomison's iconographic association between the clown figure and death. This work extends the message of his **A Warning to France whose Roofs will melt but hardly with love** (1976), in which a helmeted Punch figure brandishes a sword at an allegorical figure of French liberty.<sup>4</sup>

In 1980, Fomison stated on national television: "If you are involved in causes, you can't not paint about them"<sup>5</sup>, and elsewhere: "You can't belong to a society without being a critic of it".<sup>6</sup> Such maxims to live by are demonstrations of Fomison's perception of the role of the artist as an active participant in the history of the culture rather than as a passive and marginalized onlooker. For Fomison, the artist is both historian and history-maker, record-keeper and agent for change. Images document issues of the culture to which the artist belongs: the life feeds the art; the art records the emotions and values of the life.

While Fomison's dark early work depicting the miseries and deformations under the skin of a complacent society is political in tone, its politics are of the general, outcries against the inhumanity of common existence rather than accusations of specific injustice. However, his

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<sup>3</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 23 April 1981.

<sup>4</sup>see: James Ross, 'A Singular Vision', *Art New Zealand*, xxxx 1977, p. 23.

<sup>5</sup>Hamish Keith, Interview with Tony Fomison, *Kaleidoscope*, TVNZ, 1980: Quoted in *Anxious Images*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1984.

<sup>6</sup>Garth Cartwright, interview with Tony Fomison, 1986.



political 'paintings' of the last years of the 1970s and early years of the 'eighties point an accusing finger at specific social and cultural ills. Their narrative quality slips sideways into an informative function, albeit cloaked in the semi-mystical guise of the spiritual. France is identified as a villain within the Pacific; at home, the struggle of the land and the people against the spectre of indiscriminatory money-making, in the example of the proposed aluminium smelter at Aramoana, is outlined in paintings such as **Ko Nga Tu a Rakihouia** (1982) and **Koraka Te Rangitira** (1982); the encroaching tide of Muldoonist economic policy is commented upon in **That little man he's not his biggest yet, That little man he is to bigger get** (1976), which casts the then Prime Minister in Fomison's frequently employed absurdist jester/death role.

In the continuous symbiotic relationship between his life and art, Fomison's outspokenness on heartfelt political issues within the medium of his paintings was matched by the vocality of his physical presence. In Auckland during 1980 he made his presence felt by "voicing his objections to a theatre production during a play, and... handing out pamphlets outside [an] art auction, putting the case for painters to get 5% of any resale of their work."<sup>7</sup> He was frequently to be seen - and heard - at exhibition openings at galleries throughout Auckland, drinking freely in the company of his many friends. In 1983 Fomison joined the Labour Party, "with the ulterior motive of getting National out", and launched into a campaign of letter writing to politicians concerning "the Samoan issue, then about the nuclear ships one."<sup>8</sup> A few weeks before the election in 1984, in which the Labour Party swept to victory, Fomison's comments were sought by *The Auckland Star* for a feature entitled 'Who They'll Vote For - and why'. He stated that "the Labour Party is a must if you're

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<sup>7</sup>Terry Snow, 'Tony Fomison, out of darkness into light', *The Auckland Star*, 12 November 1980.

<sup>8</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 9 April 1983.

an artist... The Labour Party has traditionally supported subsidy for the arts, not user-pays which is the National Party attitude."<sup>9</sup>

Fomison's political articulation did not confine itself solely to the exigencies of the European power base into which he had been born. His standing in the Samoan community of his adult adoption allowed him to speak out there also on matters of strong feeling. In the late 1970s he was honoured with the ceremonial Samoan tattoo which covered his body from waist to knees. This is a traditionally painful process suffered by Samoan men of status as an induction into the ranks of the *matai* (chiefs). Fomison's rite of passage into *fa'a Samoa* via the *tatu* lasted for over a year, the sessions with bone chisel and ink frequently interrupted by infection. It was a test of courage both physical and mental, living through periods where his body was in such unbearable pain that "he had to sleep between chairs or standing up."<sup>10</sup> The *tatu*, exceedingly rarely given to people of *palagi* descent, indicated the respect of the Samoan community for Fomison's voice and presence among them: for Fomison, the tattoo was an indelible symbol of his immersion in, and respect for, *fa'a Samoa*. While undergoing the tattooing process, Fomison made imprints on cloth of the bloody patterns raised on his skin, sending them to friends around the country. These *tatu* prints, documenting the stigmata of Polynesian art and spiritual values which Fomison willingly wore on his body, bear a strange relationship with his religious paintings of the late 1960s, such as *Study of Head of Christ by Morales* (1966) [Fig. 7], which also appears as records of physical suffering stained into the folds of a cloth.

The logical extension of Fomison's involvement with the Samoan community in Auckland was to make a trip to the land in which the

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<sup>9</sup>Who They'll Vote For - and why', *The Auckland Star*, 13 July 1984.

<sup>10</sup>Garth Cartwright, op. cit.

culture is based. In early 1982 a proposed trip to the Islands with friends engaged in a study of the art of the Pacific tattoo was postponed for Fomison due to ill-health. He wrote to Murray Horton that "When a couple of friends dropt [sic] me - they were carrying me at the time - my cracked ribs cracked again.... we were all drunk...",<sup>11</sup> an injury he had previously suffered in another alcohol-induced fall. The following year better health allowed him to pay a short visit to Samoa during September 1983 as an unpaid mediator between the local people and the largely European film crew which he accompanied. He wrote to Horton: "I had just amassed my quarterly mortgage interest: I used it to get a ticket on the same plane [as the film crew], and the next week was used, running around raising the same number of bucks; then we were away."<sup>12</sup>

Fomison's feelings about his time in Samoa were, as ever, ambivalent. It was the first time he had left New Zealand in fifteen years, since he had returned from Europe; this time his fortunes were reversed, the party he travelled with feted at every destination, each village "hospitable to this white, tattooed skin."<sup>13</sup> Fomison wrote:

I was more than touched by those chisels... that I can say anything I like  
defending people against the occasionally tyrannical matai that I've run across.  
Either here or in Samoa, I've never met a better tattoo than mine. And that has  
helped when I see injustice.<sup>14</sup>

While appreciating the attention and efforts of the local Samoan people to entertain the visitors, Fomison was struck by the obvious poverty and borderline existence of the inhabitants of the Islands. As the party travelled from village to village, filming the tattooing process, Fomison

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<sup>11</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 23 June 1982.

<sup>12</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 9 October 1983.

<sup>13</sup>*ibid.*

<sup>14</sup>Undated letter to Murray Horton.

noted that it was incumbent upon the chief's son undergoing the tattoo to have the process completed within the minimum possible time, both proof of the man's fortitude as a warrior and for reasons of stringent economics - the village could not afford to extend the hospitality customary in Samoan culture for any length of time.

Much of Fomison's luggage consisted of his portable painting kit - brushes, oil, turps, a few tubes of paint and small commercially produced painting boards, paraphernalia which accompanied him on the trips he frequently made around his own country. The Samoan chiefs were accommodating of this practice, storing wet paintings up in the rafters or under the guest bed, sending one of the boys "to catch us up with it at the next village, wedged sideways in a biscuit box."<sup>15</sup> Fomison produced about a dozen small paintings during his time in Samoa, including **The daughter of Kupe: Hine te Uira, who discovered greenstone**, and **The House of the Chief (O Le Fale O Le Matai)**, both painted on the island of Upolo. In general, however, Fomison's work of the 1980s dealt with issues raised by New Zealand's Maori culture rather than with its Samoan one. Whereas Maori titles are commonly given to his paintings of the 1980s, he only rarely used the Samoan language for identification of his works - **The Mad One (ole fa'aluma)** (1984) is a rare example.

Fomison's perceived reluctance to comment visually on matters relating to *fa'a Samoa* is interesting, given his readiness to employ his knowledge of *taha Maori* in his work. He had an extensive reading and speaking knowledge of both the Maori and Samoan languages, and had earned the right to speak - and to be listened to - in both cultures. While never abstracting the decorative forms of Maori art to create his images - commenting that he respected Maori art too much to make a pastiche of

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<sup>15</sup>Lara Strongman, Interview with Tony Fomison, July 1989.

it<sup>16</sup> - Fomison was concerned with a visual revelation of the truths which endure at the heart of Maori culture: the ideas described by Maori art, rather than the form of the description. It is significant that he did not utilize the same methodology with his experience of *fa'a Samoa*: a withdrawal which may be understood as a cultural politeness, a reluctance to set down in paint issues not of the indigenous culture, to which Fomison was privy on terms of courtesy. However, Fomison was instrumental in convincing his close friend, Auckland Samoan artist Fatu Feu'u, to find his own voice within the decorative vocabulary of *fa'a Samoa* rather than in the language of modernist painting to which Feu'u had originally been drawn - an influence fitting in Fomison's code of the necessity for *propriety* in cultural appropriation, where a sense of belonging to a culture identifies the artist working within it.

Despite Fomison's reluctance to impinge visually on the niceties of his induction into Samoan culture, he produced one very significant 'Polynesian' work in the early mid 'eighties. He began the **Ponsonby Madonna** [Fig. 30], as the painting became known colloquially, in early 1982, just before the cancellation of his trip to the Islands: with various crises of one sort or another to contend with, it took him almost eighteen months to complete.

The **Ponsonby Madonna**, or **Mother and Child**, was Fomison's first - and in the event, his only - mural, the culmination of his frequently expressed ambitions towards the large scale. Although still enjoying considerable notoriety and reasonable sales of work, by 1982 his standard of living was once more moving towards the borderline, the effects of many drinking sessions bringing about continual semi-health. He wrote of this time: "Certainly I was living off yams spuds kumera ect [sic], wrapped in foil and stuck in the under-ash of the fire that was keeping my winter

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<sup>16</sup>The *Auckland Star*, 12 November 1980.

studio warm while I worked."<sup>17</sup> He jumped at the chance to produce a local mural under the auspices of the Project Employment Programme (PEP) supervised by Artwork, which would guarantee him a small income for six months. In the company of other local artists, Fomison selected a site for his mural within Ponsonby: he chose St Paul's College, a school with a predominantly Polynesian roll not far from his home in Chamberlain Street.

With the school authorities providing three large hessian covered panels as the support, Fomison set to work on the mural. His initial vision of the painting described a cave from which St Paul addressed a group of students: he soon found this idea unworkable, and discarded it in favour of a representation of a Polynesian Christ, "a sort of Te Kooti figure."<sup>18</sup> As the mural progressed, Fomison became increasingly frustrated. Forced to battle head on with the intricacies of scale, his fight over his own technical shortcomings took place on the constantly changing panorama of the hessian ground. The six months deadline came and went: Fomison remained at the College. The evident seriousness and determination with which Fomison regarded the mural's commission communicated itself to the principal of the College, Brother Terence Lord, who allowed Fomison to come and go as he pleased, providing a mattress for him in the disused room where Fomison worked on the image and allowing him to eat with the Brothers in the college kitchen. Br Lord also lent Fomison easels from the school's art room to continue his own painting at the College, in between onslaughts on the mural.

Wrestling with the mural, Fomison spent a year on the painstaking working-up of images, his dissatisfaction eradicating them from sight again as they neared completion. There were hold-ups due to his broken

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<sup>17</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 13 November 1983.

<sup>18</sup>*The Auckland Star*, 27 June 1983.

ribs ("not being able to stretch my arms enough to encounter it"<sup>19</sup>) and general ill-health. His anxiety gradually abated as the final image began to take shape on the ground, now thick with paint and the memory of discarded images. Trusting to instinct, letting the image find its own form and feeling, he wrote: "My paintbrushes said they were not interested in flat pattern decoration, they said they wanted to do a big picture, and they got me to cheerfully ignore all outside pressures until I got the image we wanted."<sup>20</sup>

The final image differed radically from Fomison's original conception. He stated:

I tried so many ambitious things which were beyond the reach of my paintbrushes at the time and perhaps were also irrelevant. The complex compositions I tried and had to paint out every time.... I finished up with just two heads. Mary the Madonna, Polynesian, the Christ Child as a teenager because it was a teenage school... his head next to hers with a flower in her ear...<sup>21</sup>

After a year and a half of work, Fomison reached an image of great simplicity and gentle religiosity, conceived from his deep sympathy towards Polynesian values. Always considering the mural's location within a Polynesian Christian environment populated by adolescents, he finally achieved an image which he considered complemented the values of the mural's audience: "I felt in my heart that the figure of the mother which is so important in Polynesian extended family, the whanau, and the strong image of the mother and child, could be linked."<sup>22</sup>

While Fomison professed himself satisfied with the image which had evolved out of eighteen months of thought, painstaking effort, and

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<sup>19</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 21 August 1982.

<sup>20</sup>Tony Fomison, *Bringing Back the Scattered*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1983, n.p.

<sup>21</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

<sup>22</sup>*The Auckland Star*, 27 June 1983.

physical discomfort, the 'Ponsonby Madonna' is far from being one of his best paintings. Though its sheer size achieves a monumentality of effect, the tight, limited composition would work equally well on a small scale as an image for private devotion, a wallet-sized prayer card: as a public icon, despite Fomison's battles with its large scale format, the overall effect is simply of a small painting grown out of the confines of its frame. It achieves nothing of the haunting memory of the figure of his early *No!* (1969-71) [Fig. 10], or the sense of the land's monumental permanence in *The Fugitive* (1980-82) [Fig. 27].

However, both Fomison and the College authorities were satisfied with the mural, which was lent to the Auckland City Art Gallery to swell a solo exhibition by Fomison in June 1983, soon after its completion. The show was the fourth in the Gallery's series of Artist's Projects, and was entitled 'Bringing Back the Scattered'. The 'scattered' were Fomison's paintings, in their new residences in the private homes of their owner; he drew in his net and gathered them together for the exhibition, his first in Auckland for two years, with a slightly grudging acknowledgement to the lenders, writing in the catalogue: "My paintbrushes tell me they're talking to the public, not just to those who can afford to take the pictures home. So, given the freedom of a capitalist patronage system, thanks to owners who have nevertheless lent my pictures back to the public for this show."<sup>23</sup>

'Bringing Back the Scattered' shared the Gallery's premises with a major retrospective exhibition devoted to the work of New Zealand painter Rita Angus. In another of the odd coincidences which laid a structure of chance over Fomison's life, less than two years later he became the first Artist in Residence at Rita Angus's cottage in Wellington.

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<sup>23</sup>Tony Fomison, *Bringing Back the Scattered*, op.cit.



Taking up the residency provided by the Thorndon Trust and the stipend paid by the Queen Elizabeth II Arts Council, Fomison announced that there were two major projects which he intended to complete during his time in Wellington: the first, to rework several large images which he had painted out in a fit of dissatisfaction the previous year: the second, to produce a series of flower paintings in honour of Rita Angus. While the latter resolve seemed a little unlikely, Fomison swore it was his genuine intention, telling a reporter from *The Dominion* that he "had painted flowers in the past. No kind in particular, but ones he had made up in his mind."<sup>24</sup>

Fomison's plans for his work were put on hold for a while when, shortly after his arrival in Wellington, he misplaced his footing at a provincial art gallery, falling heavily and badly breaking his leg. He had been somewhat disappointed by the semi-furnished state of his temporary home<sup>25</sup>: time in hospital, a lengthy convalescence during which the same leg was fractured in another place after a violent physical dispute with a visitor to the Cottage, an incident which resulted in a night-long interview at the Police Station and a small piece in the newspaper of the following day<sup>26</sup>, made the period of the residency an unsettling time for Fomison. Years of self-abuse and hard living had taken their toll on his health: an ongoing liver complaint and a year spent on crutches were constant reminders of mortality, a 'memento mori' as portable as the tiny tondo of the same name he had exhibited at the Elva Bett Gallery in 1979 - a grinning death's head gleaming in the darkness. He was 46, in poor health, and, after his six months in Wellington, homeless again, having sold his house in Ponsonby. Nothing daunted, he decided to take to the road again, travelling among a network of friends and acquaintances

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<sup>24</sup>*The Dominion*, 9 May 1985.

<sup>25</sup>*My Work My Self*, Manawatu Art Gallery, 1987.

<sup>26</sup>'Machete Attack on Man in Thorndon', *The Evening Post*, 22 June 1985.

living throughout the country.

Fomison's image as a 'bohemian' artist of the old school, a self-obsessed, self-flagellating individual pained by the exigencies of desperate living and gripped by a consuming passion, was a role into which he had slipped with consummate ease since his earliest days in Christchurch: it was an idea which was placed into a general New Zealand art context in 1984, with his inclusion in the 'Anxious Images' exhibition initiated by the Auckland City Art Gallery. 'Anxious Images' brought together a disparate group of contemporary New Zealand artists linked through a common concern with "the expression and communication of powerful emotion: unease, anxiety, anger, fear and pain."<sup>27</sup> Their images were intense, gripping, raw, often semi-political in tone, concerned with the expression of individual feeling rather than with the polemics of art-making (art dissecting itself): an intensity of emotion brought about in part by the travails of the artist's own existence and understood by the observer in terms of a personally observed vocabulary of feeling.

The idea of the artist as a "model sufferer"<sup>28</sup>, where images of desolation imply a sense of spiritual malaise in the part of their creator, provides a framework with which to look at Fomison's activity. The quite intense periods of suffering which Fomison experienced at various times - his childhood illnesses, the time spent in prison and hospital, his poverty, self-neglect, drug and alcohol addictions - appeared, at times, to be actively sought out by him. While the genetic roll of the dice had dealt him physical weakness and a talent for visual imagery, the ongoing 'desperate living' which characterized his largely uncomfortable life involved an implicit and wilful choice. From his early identification with the victims

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<sup>27</sup>Alexa Johnstone, *Anxious Images*, exhibition catalogue, Auckland City Art Gallery, 1984.

<sup>28</sup>see M. Weisel and S.Morgan, 'ARS DOLOROSA: The Artist as a Model Sufferer', *Parkett Art Magazine*, May 1990, no. 18.

of society's rough neglect encountered on his travels overseas, he cast himself in the guise of a sufferer. It is not necessary for an artist to suffer to create art; not every person who has suffered becomes an artist: yet for Fomison the two ideas were inextricably linked, life and art locked in a deathly embrace.

In general art historical terms, the connection between the suffering mind of the artist and the visual expression of emotion is a nineteenth century Romantic ideal. The Romantic artist is perceived as an outsider looking in from the fringes of society (and thus able to identify with its other marginalized groups). This historical definition of Romanticism may also be linked to the frequently observed perception of Fomison as a visitor from another time: a historian, a Victorian collector, an atavistic throwback. Another extension of the ideal of the artist as a symbolic sufferer for society is its close connection with the tenets of Christianity, where the artist as a prophet, as a lone voice in the wilderness concerned with the revelation of the fundamentals of human existence, is transformed by association into the role of the martyred Christ. This relationship between Romanticism and religion can be clearly seen in Fomison's works of the early and mid seventies, where the division between expressionistic self-portraits and portrayals of Christ are frequently blurred.

'Anxious Images' brought together and gave visible body to these common undercurrents prevalent in the work of individually distinct New Zealand artists. The exhibition's catalogue carefully set out the common principles of its visually disparate works; the sense of beauty in enduring expression of feeling; a spiritual-cum-religious unease; a concern for contemporary politics; the politics of the sexual and domestic; regional and internationalist implications. While his inclusion in the exhibition

was entirely appropriate, Fomison's eventual feelings about the project were in themselves anxious. He commented: "We in that show were regarded as self destructive, over-romantic artists.... that old image.... ok, a few of us died, but we did not have that intention about ourselves. We just felt that to be an artist we had to give it all a go."<sup>29</sup>

Fomison certainly "gave it all a go" - as did his close friend and partner in unease, Philip Clairmont, whose frighteningly chaotic images of domestic disharmony - ravaging washbasins, yawning fireplaces, a scarred couch (the beast lurking under the comfortable veneer) were also central to an examination of the 'anxious images' of contemporary New Zealand art. When, on 14 May 1984, the struggle and suffering of existence became too much for Clairmont, who died by his own hand, Fomison was devastated. He stated that the loss of Clairmont was "A death I have never recovered from"<sup>30</sup>, and cited his own perception of Clairmont's identification with the victim as a contributing factor towards his suicide, adding "You can't be a painting, you can only do it."<sup>31</sup> Though Fomison was thus aware of the correspondence between his own existence and that of his friend's, it appeared that he was powerless to halt the tide of self-destruction which was increasingly threatening to engulf him, as it had Clairmont. Whereas Clairmont's death was mercifully quick, Fomison's suicide was lifelong. Though he had made an initial choice (albeit perhaps an unconscious one) to live a suffering existence, by the time of Clairmont's death he had removed his own power to make radical choices. Addiction to a lifestyle had killed his willpower to change. He produced a small painting at this time in memory of Clairmont, **"Don Quixote" finished off with Phil Clairmont in mind** (1984) [Fig. 32], a 'brushy' work caught on a heavily textured hessian ground, strangely

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<sup>29</sup>Lara Strongman, op. cit.

<sup>30</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', *Art New Zealand*, no. 52, Spring 1989, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup>Garth Cartwright, interview, op. cit.

reminiscent of the early *Head of Christ* by Morales (1966) [Fig. 7].

Cartwright cites Clairmont's death as the date from which Fomison went into decline.<sup>32</sup> Exhaustion, shock, and alcoholism conspired to produce severe attacks of ill health where painting became impossible: the closure of the Denis Cohn Gallery, Fomison's agent in Auckland, signalled an end to the exhibition of his work in dealer galleries in the city: the images he did manage to produce, in Cartwright's considered opinion, lacked "the subtleties and cultural resonance of his previous work." The last years of the 1980s thus assume the denouement in the dramatic story of Fomison's life.

The decline of a life, the epilogue of a story, presupposes a high plateau of achievement from which the dramatic action wanes - a descent from a height. For Fomison, this point of ascendancy may be placed during the years 1980-83, when, with the support and respect of his peers within the arts, Samoan and Maori communities to which he belonged, he produced his most successful works ever. Paintings such as *Not just a picnic* (1980-82) [Fig. 28], *The Fugitive* (1980-82) [Fig. 29], and *Nga Toki Mate Whenua: Axes Felling Trees, Kill the Land* (1983) [Fig 31] are among the crowning achievements of Fomison's life. These are unerring images, informed by the congruent union of the knowledge of direct experience, accumulated during a journey lasting many years, with the technical accomplishments of a lifetime of art-making.

These works of the early 1980s recapture - and extend - the intensity of feeling previously reached only in the most successful of Fomison's earlier paintings, works from the early seventies such as *No!* (1969-71) [Fig. 10] or *Study of Hands* (1970). Like those earlier images, the paintings of the early 'eighties acknowledge the primacy of the imagination, the mystical

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<sup>32</sup>Cartwright, G. 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', op.cit., p. 69.

vision of the artist communicating itself to the onlooker in terms of shared emotional experience. In the later paintings, however, this mystic vision is both grounded in and described by the body of a landscape setting: stripped of its dark shroud of chiaroscuro, imagination is set free to roam within the secret places of the land. These are images of a deep cultural resonance, where the pent-up and inward-looking emotion of the dark earlier works explodes outwards in a torrent of light, illuminating the land and its culture.

The contrast between the use of light in the two series of paintings, separated by a decade, reflects Fomison's growth in stature as an artist over those years. His mastery over the art of painting itself is indicated by his confident employment of lighter hues and a greater range of colours applied directly to the canvas, replacing his earlier, rigidly controlled and tentative monochromatic drawing with paint. The light let into the later canvasses equally reflects Fomison's increased assurance with the manipulation of his subject matter. The luminous quality of Fomison's earlier paintings is that of the searing, hastily expended flame of a match lit in total darkness: that of the later works, the diffused golden glow of the sun at dawn, streaming in over the land from the sea. The earlier works pin-point the personal: the later works illuminate the general concerns of the cultural.

The confidence to produce the works of the early eighties, which both speak for and narrate issues surfacing in Fomison's reading of the land - the psyche of the cultural rather than the psychology of the individual - grew out of the achievements of Fomison's personal life. His extensive knowledge of, and ability to speak for, the issues pertinent to a shared culture, informed his works and provided them with a credibility lacking in his earlier attempts at the genre, the clumsily conceived history paintings of the late 1977-1980, such as *Omai* (1977) and *The Man of Peace*

and the Man of War (Te Whiti and Titokowaru) (1980) [Fig. 27].

**The Fugitive** (1980-82) [Fig 29] depicts a small, genderless, unidentified human being picking its way through a vast unpopulated landscape: a landscape of monumental age and indefinite sense of menace, dwarfing its sole inhabitant in a sense of pseudo-Romantic grandeur. The vaguely risible horned guardian figures of earlier works represent Fomison's initial attempts to anthropomorphize the emotion and sense of historical continuum present in his perception of the landscape: in works such as **The Fugitive**, Fomison discarded such uneasy symbolism in favour of portraying the land as a symbol of itself.

In 1919, the Italian mystic painter of symbols Giorgio de Chirico wrote: "A work of art must relate something that does not appear in its visible form."<sup>33</sup> The visible form of Fomison's **The Fugitive** is its landscape setting, a landscape conceived in the imagination but grounded with the documentary evidence of observation: an exaggerated, metaphysical environment, yet concretely familiar as a recognizably New Zealand landscape. Through the imagination of the artist, the landscape thus assumes a dual aspect: the first, the common nature of surface recognition; the second, a metaphysical or 'ghostly' aspect, the dark half, the doppelganger, the hyperreality present in surface 'truth'. The landscape's outward and visible form thus describes its inward, invisible nature. Its depiction becomes a sacrament, it becomes its own symbol of hidden mysteries.

Fomison's 'landscapes of the mind' have frequently been described as 'apocalyptic', his concern with metaphysics thus placed under the umbrella of a religious consciousness. The barren desolation of Fomison's land seems to imply a mystical, pre-human state of creation, or even a

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<sup>33</sup> Giorgio de Chirico, *Sull'Arte Metafisica*, Rome, 1919.

post-holocaust desecration: an environment where life is controlled by majestic, in-human forces, where human will is subsumed by the implacable movements of the land. The puny figure of **The Fugitive** appears crushed by the monumental nature of the landscape through which it flees, the first-born - or the last survivor - of cataclysmic events. The terror from which the figure is not described within the image: it seems, however, that it has no choice but to run, perhaps from something that lies behind, perhaps in a vain attempt to outdistance his own nature, imprisoned and mortal within the vast continuum of the landscape.

While **The Fugitive** has no option but to seek impossible escape, a distinct, human choice is proffered in another of Fomison's most successful images of the early 1980s, **Nga Toki Mate Whenua: Axes Felling Trees, Kill the Land** (1983) [Fig. 31]. In this work, set against the diorama of a barren land, a blind, stony-faced figure hacks at the knotted trunk of a huge tree with a long-bladed knife. The agent for destruction resembles all too closely the living trees at which it swings with murderous intent, almost as if it were blindly dismembering limbs of its own body. This is an image of great spiritual subtlety, where the invisible is given form by the unerring vision of the artist. It is also a 'history' painting, narrating the story of the past and present ravishment of the land by human settlement. It stands as an aid to conscience, a visual bulwark against the continuation of such practices, which, in Fomison's vision, destroys the spirit of both the land and its people.

The tree is an infrequently recurrent motif in Fomison's work from the mid-1970s, after his **Man Imploring the Tree of Life** (1973-74). Trees surface again ten years later, with **Nga Toki Mate Whenua** (1983), and reflect the shift in Fomison's cultural assimilation. Whereas the early image belongs to the tradition of giving form to general Jungian archetypes, **Nga Toki Mate Whenua** locates the tree specifically within the



New Zealand cultural consciousness, as a symbol for the life of the land. This sensibility recurs in a lithograph of 1985, **Paptuenuku out in the cold, those pine trees they've got to go**, which reveals the taking over of the New Zealand bush by a transplanted European landscape, while the late **Question and Answer: The Tree of Life** (1989) reduces the tree form to an undulating spire of power, like the funnel of a tornado or perhaps the smoke from a giant bonfire.

Fomison's concern with portraying issues rooted within the visionary landscape of his wanderings assimilates his work within the genre of regionalist painting, a post-colonial sensibility common to the visual arts of many cultures. In New Zealand idiom, this sensibility is most clearly described in the works of painters active during the 1930s such as Rita Angus, Rata Lovell-Smith or Christopher Perkins, drawn to an examination of the uneasy relationship between human settlement and a new - at least in European terms - environment, redolent with a mysterious symbolism. Fomison was happy to be known as a regionalist painter. In 1976 he stated: "I regard myself as a provincial artist with a strong commitment to my own feelings and my own locality."<sup>34</sup>

Fomison's commitment to the twin 'truths' of his existence - the dissemination of both his own culture and his single-minded vision - entailed a radical narrowing of the visual influences available to him as an artist. He had no interest in the appropriation of contemporary international trends, perceiving them as irrelevant to his intention. The 'international' art which had informed his earlier works was, in a sense, without specific national identity, as historical artefacts within the common fishing-pool of European culture. During his early travels in Europe, it was, in fact, his regionalist discoveries which had impressed

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<sup>34</sup>Denys Trussell, 'A Provincial Artist Talks of Religious Compassion', *City News*, 17 August 1976.

him the most. He commented:

This was the case whether it was Spanish Renaissance sculpture (having to exist outside the unfair limelight of Italian Renaissance sculpture), or whether it was the English church doom paintings (having to exist outside the limelight of French 14th century visual art). The 14th Century French painting was already anticipating the realism and amorality of the main Renaissance. But the English doom-painters were still producing Romanesque-like morality plays in paint that focused on the apocalypse. The wooden Spanish sculptures were not art for art's sake. They were icons concerned with human fate. They had an ulterior motive, a religious intention. So too do the big murals of Diego Rivera, and I find that I'm attracted to the Mexican school of mural painters.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of direct art historical comparison, Fomison's work is difficult to categorize. Rejecting the trends and devices of twentieth century modernism as irrelevant to his intention of portraying singular vision, Fomison's work may best be related to that of other eccentrics of European art history. His paintings contain something of Goya's obsession with suffering and violent death, his exposure of human frailty and madness; they recall the haunted landscapes of American eccentric artist Albert Pinkham Ryder; contain something of the obsessive religious vision of Pre-Raphaelite Holman Hunt; the dark fragility of Odilon Redon's figures; the psychosis of Richard Dadd; the nightmare moment of Fuseli; the sense of emotional symbolism rooted in the body of the landscape seen in the works of artists as diverse as Salvator Rosa and Puvis de Chauvannes. Closer to the present day, there are strong parallels between Fomison's images and the work of contemporary British idiosyncratic artist Francis Bacon. Like Fomison, Bacon has frequently worked from photographic imagery, producing distorted figural images of graphic horror with overtones of a religious impulse. There is also a relationship between the private lives of Bacon and Fomison: both embody the role of the

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<sup>35</sup>ibid.

Romantic, subversive artist figure, leading sensationalist existences as culture-heroes beyond the mores of society.

Though not subject himself to local visual influence, Fomison's own influence on various artists of his acquaintance was marked. In painterly terms, and in the adoption of an "emblematic intensity" through a Polynesian subtext<sup>36</sup> and the emotive value of the figure, Fomison was a formative influence on his close friend Richard McWhannell. Through his profound study of the crossing points between New Zealand's European, Maori and Samoan cultures, Fomison provided a path from which artists as diverse as Darcy Nicholas, Emare Karaka, Norman Te Whata and Chris Booth have branched.<sup>37</sup> In terms of figural distortion and the portrayal of unease through a dreamscape setting, Fomison's legacy can be detected in the works of Bill Hammond and Jenny Dolezel, while his genial encouragement and constructive criticism towards his friends Llewelyn Summers and Fatu Feu'u was a motivational factor in their subsequent decisions to pursue art as a career.

Apart from the major exhibitions of the first half of the 1980s in which Fomison was involved (the touring survey show, 'Bringing Back the Scattered' and 'Anxious Images'), his contemporaries had many opportunities to view his work in smaller exhibitions at dealer galleries and public art institutions around the country. As has already been noted, he held an exhibition of recent paintings at the Denis Cohn Gallery in Auckland during November 1980. There were thirty works included in the exhibition, a mixture of landscapes (*Beach Caves*, *The quarry*, *A pass in the limestone country*, *Kaikoura Coast* 1980), images which dealt with 'clown' iconography (*Suspicious clown*, *A mad she-clown*, *Shakespearean clown*, *Pierrot-le-Fou* and so on), and others of a more eccentric symbology

<sup>36</sup>Ian Wedde, 'McWhannell's minis full of intensity', *The Evening Post*, 21 August 1984.

<sup>35</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', op.cit., p. 68.

(Humpty Dumpty who came to the party, Ventriloquism, and The death of Classical Sculpture, or, Vandalism in a Kiwi Garage). In 1981 his **Second Study of Hans Holbein the Younger's 'The Dead Christ'** (1972) (now known as **The Corpse of Christ**) was included in 'Stations of the Cross' at the Govett-Brewster Gallery in New Plymouth, while in February 1982 he showed two self portraits in 'Me by Myself' at the National Art Gallery in Wellington, exhibiting the following month at the Janne Land gallery. He held an exhibition at the Hamilton Centre Gallery in 1983, which included many of the works from the earlier show with Denis Cohn, supplemented by recent paintings on historical Maori themes and two works completed on his recent trip to Samoa. In February the following year works by Fomison were included in a group show of gallery artists at the Janne Land Gallery, while in 1984 Fomison showed twice at the Denis Cohn Gallery, in September and December.

During the years immediately following the close of his painful sojourn at the Rita Angus Cottage in 1985, Fomison continued his trips around the country, meeting, talking - and drinking - with friends and acquaintances drawn from every corner of the art world. His first port of call was Nelson, where he taught at a summer school with Michael Smither. He travelled next to Driving Creek in the Coromandel, where potter Barry Brickell offered him a converted railway carriage for an extended convalescence. Fomison arrived at Driving Creek Pottery and Railway just before Christmas 1985: away from the pressures of the city, he remained in the Coromandel until the winter months of 1986, gradually gathering his flagging forces about himself. He spent most of that year on crutches, his twice-broken leg slowly knitting itself together.

His time at Driving Creek is marked by a slight, if noteworthy, addition to his oeuvre. Availing himself of Brickell's facilities and expertise, Fomison experimented with the techniques of ceramics, producing an

enormous selection of 'ashtrays' and 'salad bowls' (depending on the size of the finished pot). Frustrated with the requirements of the firing process, whereby the skin of the clay had to be kept thin and the object hollowed out to avoid cracking, Fomison and Brickell developed a process which, for Fomison, more happily narrowed the gap between ceramics and the sculptural process with which he was familiar. By adding quantities of powdered sawdust to the clay, Fomison was able to carve and model his pottery as if it were soft stone. The sawdust in the body of the clay burned out and was lost in the firing process, producing a pitted, rough-and-ready surface with which Fomison was very satisfied.

Fomison's lengthy working holiday at the Driving Creek Pottery represented his most concerted period in working with ceramics. On the intermittent archeological fieldwork expeditions he had made around the North Island in the first years of the 1980s, he had often stayed with friends who owned small potteries in the countryside, producing small head-shaped medallions which he left behind to be glazed and fired. Several of these small pieces, made on visits to Graeme North's Pottery at Urquhart's Bay, Yvonne Rust's Pottery at Parua Bay and on an earlier stay at Barry Brickell's were included among the many 'scattered' objects brought together for his Artist's Project exhibition at the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1983 [see Fig. 33].

As Fomison grew stronger and his time at Driving Creek drew to a close, he was faced with the problem of finding a new home. He had sold the house in Chamberlain Street to which he had been much attached, and, with no prospect of imminent dealer gallery sales from solo exhibitions (although he had some works in dealers' stock around the country), he was forced to subsist on meagre savings and the Accident Compensation Corporation payment for his broken leg.<sup>38</sup> His home in

Chamberlain Street had been a refuge for him, a solitary, personally ordered retreat like all his accommodation over the years and in a variety of locations. He described his enjoyment of his home in Auckland in a letter to Murray Horton:

I've just come inside from the sunset, perched in the pohutukawa tree, wish it was big enough to live in..... in the meantime I was looking up at a sky both blue and red streaked, half a pale moon floating in it, edged by that lacquard [sic] tree's first Christmas flowers.... soundtrack: the Tongans practicing an Oratorio and birds who forgot I was there...I forgot I was there.... I became at last invisible (it got dark).<sup>39</sup>

In the months immediately following 'Bringing Back the Scattered', Fomison's standard of living had taken a rare turn for the better. With the proceeds of several substantial sales he was finally able to purchase "another old washing machine to replace the one that broke down a couple of months ago - a vacuum cleaner (My First) - battery shaver torch clothes sack of carrots another bottle of whisky cookbook oysters and porkchops.." <sup>40</sup> This unusual state of affairs did not last long. By 1986 he was once again living the more frugal existence to which he had become accustomed, in the new house which he had purchased in Williamson Avenue in Grey Lynn.

As a result of his limited finances, Fomison did not attend the opening of his most significant exhibition of 1986, a survey at the Dowse Art Museum in Lower Hutt which attempted to tell the story of Fomison's output over the seven years since the major touring exhibition organized by the Dowse. The exhibition in 1986, which did not have a catalogue, included recent works completed during Fomison's residency in

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<sup>38</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 28 August 1985.

<sup>39</sup>Undated letter to Murray Horton (1981-82).

<sup>40</sup>Letter to Murray Horton, 22 June 1983.

Wellington and others from 1980-85. Pottery by Barry Brickell, sent down from the Coromandel, was also included.

The critical response to the exhibition was largely ambivalent. The lack of a statement by Fomison regarding the background to an interpretation of his work threw the onus on the critics to unravel the 'meaning' of the images. Ian Wedde found in the exhibition "enough that is similar, enough repetition, enough signatures of style, and evidence of Fomison's persistent concerns to make us fairly confident about interpretation"<sup>41</sup>; on the other hand, Rob Taylor, reviewing for the *Dominion*, summed up Fomison as "a nostalgic illustrator whose technical limitations lend his subjects a degree of mystification that they don't necessarily merit."<sup>42</sup> As works structured on an educative basis, it appeared that, for the reviewers at least, a written text was necessary for exact elucidation of the 'meaning' of the images.

A number of recent works included in the exhibition depicted figures against the background of a cave. As a symbol of refuge in the land, the empty cave expressed the desolation of the figures; it also stood as a symbol of Fomison's own escape from the tumultuous events of his own life since Clairmont's death, his private desolation and self-containment - a hiding place within the shadows of the land, like the mazes of his earlier work. Fomison had been preoccupied in his images with ideas of caves since the early 1980s, such as *Not just a picnic* (1980-82) [Fig. 28], in which tiny anonymous figures hide inside a vast cavern. An image from the time of the survey exhibition at the Dowse Art Museum depicting the small weak legs of Maui disappearing inside the spread body of the earth mother, Hine Nui te Po, like the other 'cave' paintings represents Fomison's retrenchment, his withdrawal into private pain.

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<sup>41</sup>Ian Wedde, 'Fomison and the Intention Factor', *Evening Post*, 18 March 1986.

<sup>42</sup>Rob Taylor, 'Fomison Ambiguities Questioned', *The Dominion*, 3 April 1986.

The pain which Fomison carried with him throughout the latter half of the 1980s was expressed even more vehemently in his first complete series of lithographs, produced at the newly established Muka Studio in 1985-86. He had sold the house in Chamberlain Street to Frans Baetens and Magda van Gils, master printers who had arrived in New Zealand from Belgium in 1983 and set up a lithography studio in temporary premises.<sup>43</sup> Fomison and Alan Maddox met Baetens and Van Gils soon after their arrival, and produced a few experimental lithographs under their auspices.<sup>44</sup> Fomison was dissatisfied with his initial forays into a medium which he had not touched for 25 years, since his enrolment in an extra-mural printmaking course at the University of Canterbury. However, he persevered with lithography, working at Muka Studio whenever he visited Auckland during 1985-86. By December 1986 he had completed and printed more than fifty stones.

Like his earliest works produced via the monoprint process, the techniques of lithography were ideally suited to Fomison's art. The direct contact with the stone, where the lightest touch of the greasy lithographic crayon is faithfully reproduced in the final print, worked to the advantage of Fomison's drawing style with its feel for light and shade and sinuous line. As he grew more confident with the lithographic process, the images became more minimal, the large white spaces of the paper assuming as great a significance as the marks made on it.

In Fomison's battle against his fast declining health, the lighter demands of lithography presented themselves as a better option for him than the physical strain of painting. Instead of standing for long hours at the easel, painstakingly applying small brush-loads of paint, he was able to be seated while he drew on the lithographic stone. He worked at a furious

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<sup>43</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'New Stone Age', *New Zealand Listener*, 6 December 1986, p. 56.

<sup>44</sup>Lara Strongman, *op. cit.*



rate,<sup>45</sup> appearing to find a sense of freedom and release in the speed with which the images appeared before him. Conscious of his declining physical powers, he asserted in a characteristically stubborn statement on the invitation to the first public showing of the lithographs: "Every breath I Take/ Every stone I break/ will never break/me."

The images the stones revealed to him were raw, unformed, occupying a dangerous ground between powerful symbolic abstraction and flights of whimsy. Viewed as a whole, the lithographs provide a glimpse of the bare bones of the body of symbolism built into his paintings of the 1980s - a concern with political issues, New Zealand history, Maori and Polynesian mythology, European figural symbols such as Punch, theatrical illustration, the omniscient presence of death. The lithographs as a group represent the doodles of a suffering mind and body, images drained from the wound of a psyche. The most successful (such as **Based on Ghirlandaio's "Old Man and his Grandson"** (1986) [Fig. 36], a reworking of the theme of a painting from 1667, **Dominico Ghirlandaio's Old Man and Boy** [Fig. 8]; and **Tarawera Eruption** (1986) [Fig. 37], made to commemorate the centenary of this event) are harsh, powerful images, executed in a brittle, scratched sketchiness which at times approaches the child-like. They show Fomison looking, whether consciously or unconsciously, back to the smudgily wistful tracings of the Maori rock art of his youth. Like the rock drawings, Fomison's lithographs can be read as visual indications of a cultural subconscious, Gestalt images which spring from direct and uncluttered vision. The assured draughtsmanship of the finest lithographs provides a strong comparison with his finely crafted pencil drawings of the early 1970s: both reveal his constant fluidity with the depiction of gestural form. The less successful of the lithographs suffer through a lack of distinct gesture or movement within the image,

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<sup>45</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'New Stone Age', op. cit., p. 57.

unfocussed form smearing itself across the paper like smoke in a windy sky.

The lithographs were a hit-and-miss affair, hovering on the edge between the still-powerful and the dismissible and predictable, their lightness of touch reflecting both Fomison's waning physical powers and his capacity to produce the images he held in his mind with the minimum of possible marks. Chronicling Fomison's decline, Garth Cartwright assessed the body of prints as "a jocular scribbling pad and a personal trembling."<sup>46</sup> Fomison himself viewed his efforts with the utmost seriousness. The most effective overall group of lithographs, a suite produced in May 1985 (of which *Taranaki; your history goes way back* [Fig 35] is one of the most successful), were forbidden to be sold to foreigners - and thus presumably to be removed from the country. The series was titled **These images are mine, these images are not mine. They belong to my country**: as works informed by and indebted to New Zealand culture, Fomison felt that their final resting place should be the land of their birth.

**These images are mine...** was exhibited, in conjunction with other lithographs, ceramics and paintings, in Fomison's fourth - and final - survey exhibition initiated by a public art institution. 'My Work My Self' opened at the Manawatu Art Gallery on 2 April 1987. Unlike the survey of the previous year at the Dowse Art Museum, Fomison was able to provide a personal input into the mounting of the exhibition, and a catalogue was produced with transcripts of extensive conversations between Fomison, his ex-dealer Denis Cohn, and the Manawatu's director Tony Martin.

The bulk of the painting component of 'My Work My Self' was characterized by the influence of gestural freedom and experimentation brought about by Fomison's work at Driving Creek and Muka Studio over

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<sup>46</sup>Garth Cartwright, 'Recent Work by Tony Fomison', op.cit., p. 69.

1985-86. Apart from two notable examples (**Death the Painkiller** (c.1985-86) and **The Temptation of Christ** (1986)), the paintings were of a small scale, predominantly worked on commercial canvas boards about 30cm square, as Fomison's poor health prevented him from committing himself to the physical effort of both preparing and working on a large canvas. These small works are suffused with a bitter humour, loosely worked and full of pain. Several paintings depict literary or theatrical themes (**Billy Budd** (c.1985), **Shylock (Shakespeare)** (1986), **Curtain Call for Mrs Punch** (1986) and **Fidelio: Leonora** (1986), one of Fomison's few coloured lithographs.) Other works (**The Storm Coast; the road in , Roads out to the Coast: A View you have to Climb up to**, and **The Smile, Driving Creek Coromandel**, all from 1986) reveal the landscapes of Fomison's travels. A further series of paintings rework and reiterate aspects of Fomison's personal symbology, by this time perhaps somewhat worn through persistent use (**Pinnocchio** (1986), and **A Visit to the Hairdressers (Memento Mori)** (1986), in which a skull grins back from the salon mirror).

This final 'memento mori' of hair left behind on the barber's floor reflects a concern uppermost in Fomison's mind at the time of his exhibition in 1987 - that of the creeping closeness of his own death, a fear exacerbated in June that year by the death of his friend Colin McCahon. Over Christmas 1986, Fomison had received a severe health scare and was hospitalized for several weeks, wavering on the cusp between life and death. At 47, he was still a comparatively young man, but years of self-neglect (he would frequently forget either to eat or sleep when working or socializing) and excessive consumption of alcohol had dramatically reduced his body's ability to fend for itself. During the period spent in hospital, while his friends and family flocked to attend what would only

be the first in a series of 'deathbed' scenes, he was warned by the medical authorities in no uncertain terms of the likely - and imminent - consequences should he continue his dissolute lifestyle. Rejecting the proffered option of 'drying out' inside an alcoholic recovery hospital, he gradually recovered, and discharging himself from medical care, a little more shaky than before, resumed his life where he had left off.<sup>47</sup>

'My Work My Self' toured to the Govett Brewster and the Sarjeant Art Galleries in the second half of 1987: that year, he showed nowhere else. The following year, 1988, he showed an group of small, very recent works with a few larger and older paintings at the Pumphouse Gallery in Takapuna during April, his only exhibition that year.

Living in the house he had purchased in Williamson Avenue, surrounded by his well-ordered collections of books and artefacts, the walls hung with those works of thirty years with which he had been unable to part, Fomison existed very much from day to day, his activities circumscribed by the vagaries of his bad health. Concerned friends among the extended Samoan families of his adoption provided a succession of young helpers to live with Fomison and perform domestic duties for him: in return, Fomison kept a friendly eye on the young men and told them stories of the land and its history. He spent long periods each day resting in his room: he tired quickly and grew cold easily. Throughout his illness, he kept himself available to the diverse groups of friends who passed through his house. He assumed the role of a stationary guru, irascibly holding court with an ever-changing panoply of friends and disciples.

He held his final exhibition, his first major solo showing in Auckland for five years, at the prestigious Gow, Langsford Gallery in July 1989, coinciding with his fiftieth birthday. By now he was increasingly aware of his impending mortality: a crisis had come and gone in the early summer

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<sup>47</sup>Information given to the author by Julia Fomison, 1990.

of 1988, when he collapsed and was hospitalized with chronic liver failure. He spent several days in a coma, hanging in suspended animation between this world and the next. He recovered; he returned home; he was aware that the next breakdown in his health would be his last. He took to drinking in the privacy of his room, during the innumerable 'rests' required by his ailing body, avoiding the public displays of drunkenness which had characterised his earlier years in Auckland, when, supported by friends, he had staggered from one exhibition opening to another to a later 'session' to the point of unconsciousness in his living room. He was powerless to avert the inexorable course of his alcoholism.

The exhibition at the Gow, Langsford Gallery was Fomison's swan song, the final assertive statement of his life as an artist. The prices set on the works were higher than had been hitherto the case (although certainly realistic in terms of his status), ranging from an average of \$4500 for small works on canvas boards to \$25000 for an important large-scale work, **Question and Answer, The Tree of Life** (1989) [Fig. 40]. Nevertheless, the majority of the paintings were sold even before the crowded preview began, as the gallery staff installed the exhibition. The precarious state of Fomison's health was widely known; people flocked to see - and purchase - the very last of his works. The preview was one of the Auckland art events of the year. It was a celebration, a requiem, a tangi with the guest of honour still living, a party complete with *hangi* which brought together Fomison's friends and acquaintances among the predominantly European field of arts professionals with his Samoan and Maori 'families'. July was a month of festivities; there were several parties organized by himself and friends to mark the advent of his fiftieth birthday, while the exhibition preview recognized the achievements of his fifty years in a public fashion.

The overall impressions of the exhibition were those of rawness and

unease. From the pitted earthiness of the 51 ceramic pieces included in the show, to the brushy, hastily applied paint clinging to the textured ground of the 43 canvasses, the works suggested pain, ferment, roughness. The paintings were created out of two sources: the first, the freedom of handling Fomison gained from his exploration of the lithographic process; the second, emotional collapse and savage introspection brought about by his illness. The majority of the work dated from 1988-89, or involved a reworking of earlier images completed at this later date, as Fomison's life fell under the shadow of his impending death.

Both the figures of the works and the environment in which they were set are dream-like, distorted in the pleasant, wistful direction of daydreams or towards the haunting images of nightmare. Questioned about the nature of his own dreams, Fomison stated that the informative nature of the dream-state rendered its 'goodness' or 'badness' irrelevant.<sup>48</sup> It was the fundamental honesty of dreams, as a direct, uncontrolled, uncontrived manifestation of the subconscious which attracted Fomison. Dreams provided a 'pure', unadulterated vision which could be experienced to some extent in the suffering of mental illness, through the agency of hallucinogenic drugs or in the meditation on the self during periods of physical incarceration: extreme mental states with which Fomison was personally familiar.

The other major work of the exhibition was titled **Dreams are all we are made of** (1989), a pronouncement which speaks both to the human onlooker and to the other works which hung around it in the gallery. This large painting, with the other smaller works, reveal the inner nature of Fomison's dreams, peopled by haunting, nameless figures. They are images of a fundamental honesty, laying bare the psyches, manifestations of the ruthless pursuit after visionary truth. The works stand as

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<sup>48</sup>Anne Fenwick, 'Put art first', *Listener and TV Times*, 5 March 1990, p. 121.

documentary evidence of the punishment which Fomison's mind and body absorbed over fifty years of hard living. Earlier images of desperate emotion depicted the facades of suffering, felt at second hand through the medium of photography or the safety net of cultural identification. These last works speak of the suffering of direct experience. Scrawled hastily across the canvas, heads and limbs cut off by the edges of the frame, they appear as if a naive visionary has seized the nearest means to hand and set down the spectres of his vision before they leave his mind, as if St Anthony from his refuge in the desert captured his private demons in paint. They portray not the dreams of a culture, but the specific vision of an individual life immersed within that culture. Many of the works appear almost embryonic, as if they are in the process of creating themselves on the canvas, like dark spirits called out of a fire by incantation. Like the earlier lithographs, these last paintings conjure up shadows, the Jungian archetypes of the subconscious self.

This final exhibition contained recent examples of many of the thematic concerns which Fomison expressed throughout his work of the 1980s. There were paintings which explored literary themes (**King Lear, Shylock, Lady Macbeth, Orphelia feeling triumphant** [sic]); others concerned with religious themes (**The Darkness of your Heaven, In the Garden of Eden once again, Captain Ahab at the gate, St Peter laughing**); others which revealed the emotive import of figural distortion through Fomison's personally evolved iconography (**You mad one turned into a Fool by your own Fool who is now become your confessor and the Punch and Judy show is on, The Smile, Chook Man**); Samoan issues (**O Le Musu la (Samoan: He has become sulky), Sina Ma Tuna**); and others which dealt with deeper human concerns of time, history and the primacy of the imagination (**Life and Death, You have lost your hopes, Past, present and**

future, Dreams are all we are made of).

In his last ever review of an exhibition of recent work by Fomison, Auckland critic T.J. McNamara described the "winds of passion, pity and terror" that he felt sweeping through the paintings. This sense of fresh breeze and turbulent current was also detected by McNamara in the frenzied brushwork which Fomison applied to the canvasses.<sup>49</sup> It is almost as if Fomison's work came full circle, stormy expressionism both beginning and ending his artistic career. Whereas the brushy, expressionistic quality of his earliest works was formed through his inability to deal with the emotional value present in the relationship between the artist and the work, Fomison's last semi-expressionistic impulse was unerring, the technical accomplishments of a lifetime of art-making providing him with a precise ability to record his emotive spectres in paint. These last works are a direct manifestation of his singular vision, unencumbered by the technical difficulties of scale or composition or the desire to record issues too large or too complex for his powers, which had often dogged him in the past and distracted the viewer from an appreciation of the significance of his imagery. While earlier works stand as symbolic milestones along the journey of Fomison's life and art, these final works, exhibited at the Gow, Langsford Gallery six months before his death, indicate that Fomison was in the process of reaching the successful culmination of his journey, through his ability to record in a powerfully simple and direct manner the nameless figures and landscapes of his psyche. McNamara wrote as an introduction to his review of the exhibition: "[Fomison] has always been a presence in all the books and minds of those interested in art here in the South Pacific." The images which Fomison left behind suggest that he will continue to provide that presence in New Zealand's culture, the singular vision of his life living on through his art.

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<sup>49</sup>T.J. McNamara, 'Work swept by winds of passion', *New Zealand Herald*, 6 July 1989.



## CONCLUSION

Home is the sailor, home from sea  
And the hunter home from the hill.<sup>1</sup>

FOMISON COLLAPSED WITH a massive cerebral haemorrhage on Waitangi Day 1990, after having consumed the best part of a bottle of vodka. He died the following day in Whangerei Base Hospital.

In many ways, it was the perfect death. Surrounded by friends, both Maori and European, he had travelled north to attend - with characteristic scepticism - the celebrations at Waitangi in New Zealand's sesquicentennial year, a time for the country to reassess the nature of the relationship between its two principal cultures. That he should collapse on that day, the 150th anniversary of official European settlement in a Pacific nation, seemed somehow appropriate to the many people from different cultures who mourned his loss: perhaps even of a symbolic significance, having shared precisely a third of that period of history with the country. There was even the supposition to be made that his death, at that time and place, was no accident. Aware of his dwindling strength, of the rapid waning of his physical powers, there remains the suspicion that perhaps Fomison engineered his end, the final dramatic coincidence in a lifetime scored by the fine irony of chance.

He had been aware of his impending demise since 1984, when he had made the first of his informal wills, listing bequests to friends, people to be invited to attend his funeral, and the pall bearers for his coffin. On the event of his death, his mourners found that there were precise instructions

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<sup>1</sup>Robert Louis Stevenson, from 'Requiem': epitaph appearing on his gravestone in Western Samoa.

laid down to mark his passing in a series of events which included each of the three communities, Samoan, Maori and European, to which he belonged.

His body was dressed in his usual formal garb of short tie-dyed T shirt and Samoan *lavalava*, revealing his *tatu*. His coffin was transported to the Auckland University Marae, where he lay in state for the day of Saturday 10 February, accorded the honour of the first tangi at the Marae staged for the death of a European. The following day the coffin was taken to the Gow, Langsford Gallery, where a night-long wake was held, over which Fomison, his body surrounded by flowers in the open casket, presided as the guest of honour. Many people took the opportunity to speak at the gallery, to pay their final respects to the man they had known as a friend. At 10.30am the following morning, Monday 11 February, his immense funeral cortege wound its way to the Mangere Cemetery, a burying place favoured by Auckland's Samoan community. The funeral party, which included over a hundred mourners, among them people who had travelled the length of the country to witness Fomison's final spectacle, was piped to the graveside by a young art student.<sup>2</sup> The service was conducted by a Samoan minister in civilian clothes: it had been Fomison's express wish that he put aside his religious vestments for the occasion. As the coffin was lowered into the ground, the bagpiper played the familiar 'Now is the Hour', the unofficial anthem of New Zealanders abroad, the song which had accompanied Fomison's journey to Europe twenty five years before. It was a moment of emotional completeness for some mourners, an event which raised suspicions of an elaborately orchestrated hoax for others.

Obituaries appeared in all of New Zealand's leading daily newspapers; the New Zealand Press Association distributed notice of his death; a

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<sup>2</sup>Ian Wedde, 'Tony Fomison, 1939 - 1990', *The Evening Post*, 22 February 1990.

national television news programme carried the story. For some, though, the simple notification of Fomison's death was not enough in terms of his status. In Dunedin, Marshall Seifert commented:

Everyone knows a great man has just died... I believe that in terms of overall New Zealand culture, this is the most significant loss since James K. Baxter. But what his life stood for is what as a nation we have swept under the carpet for 150 years. It's hard for all of us who know that a mate has died maybe before he did his greatest work, and yet what he has done, history will show was the most important work in art terms, about the peoples of this country.<sup>3</sup>

Fomison died at the age of fifty, a death brought about in no small part by the vicissitudes of thirty adult years of intense living. It is futile to speculate, however, that he died before his rightful time. He would have needed to have spent his entire life in a markedly different manner to have reached old age, and it is possible that that different way of living would not have informed the images of desperate unease which he spent three decades producing. He died as he had lived, with passion, belief in himself, and a grim humour. In the years which follow, the legacy of his images and single-minded vision will be examined and re-examined, as New Zealand determines its multi-cultural identity as a Pacific nation.

*Sili le foe*<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Lee Harris, 'Seifert criticizes coverage', *Otago Daily Times*, undated clipping in National Art Gallery resource centre archives.

<sup>4</sup>Traditional Samoan proverb; tr. 'to hang up the paddle'.

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# *PLATES*

ALL MEASUREMENTS ARE IN MILLIMETRES, HEIGHT BEFORE WIDTH.  
PLEASE TURN VOLUME SIDEWAYS TO VIEW IMAGES WITH HORIZONTAL FORMAT.



1. FOMISON TRACING ROCK DRAWINGS, OPIHI, CANTERBURY, c.1960  
PHOTOGRAPH LLEWELYN SUMMERS



2. FOMISON WITH GWILYN SUMMERS AND FRIENDS, c. 1960  
PHOTOGRAPH LLEWELYN SUMMERS



3. MAN, 1961, OIL ON HARDBOARD, 925 x 545  
MONA EDGAR COLLECTION, HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN

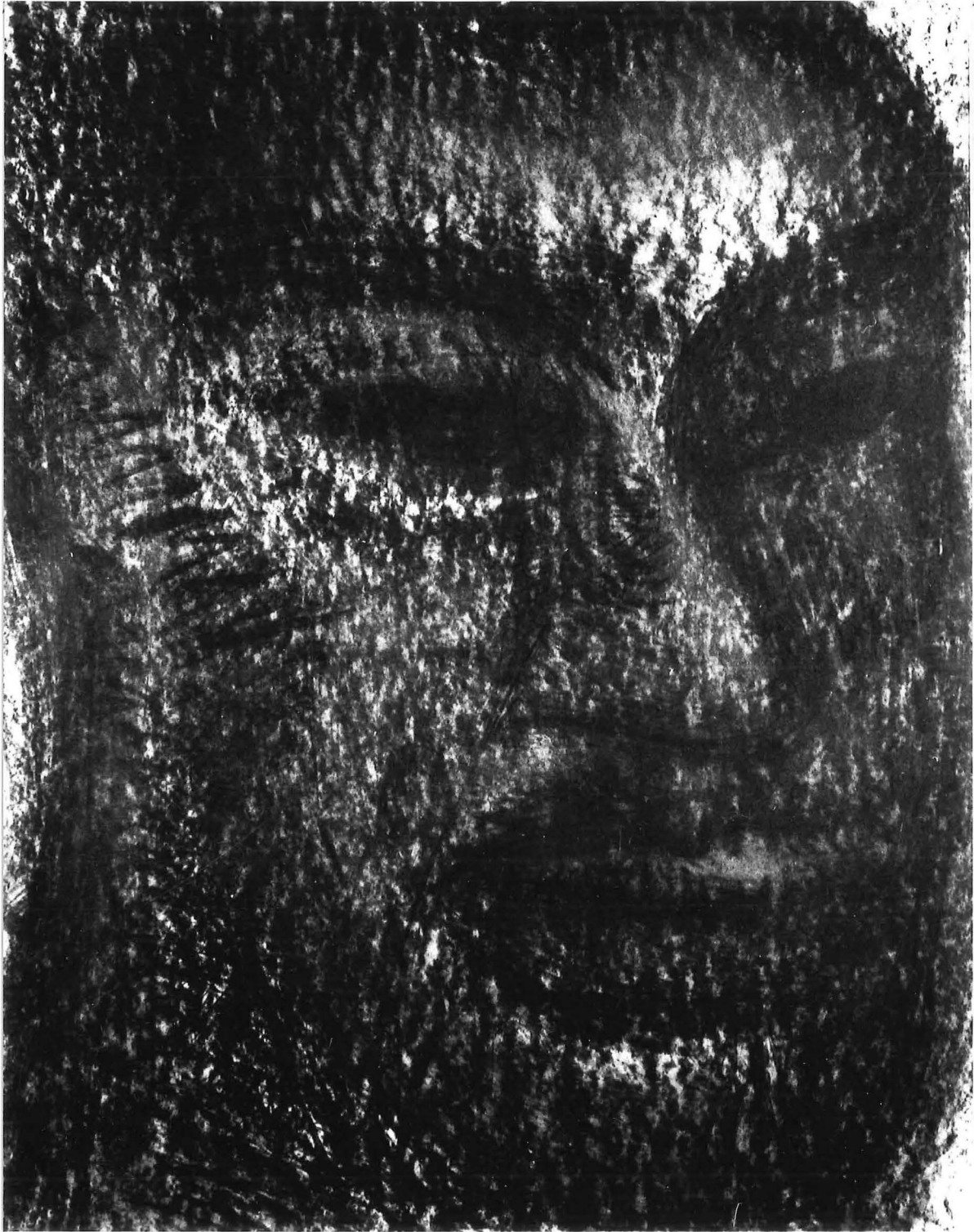




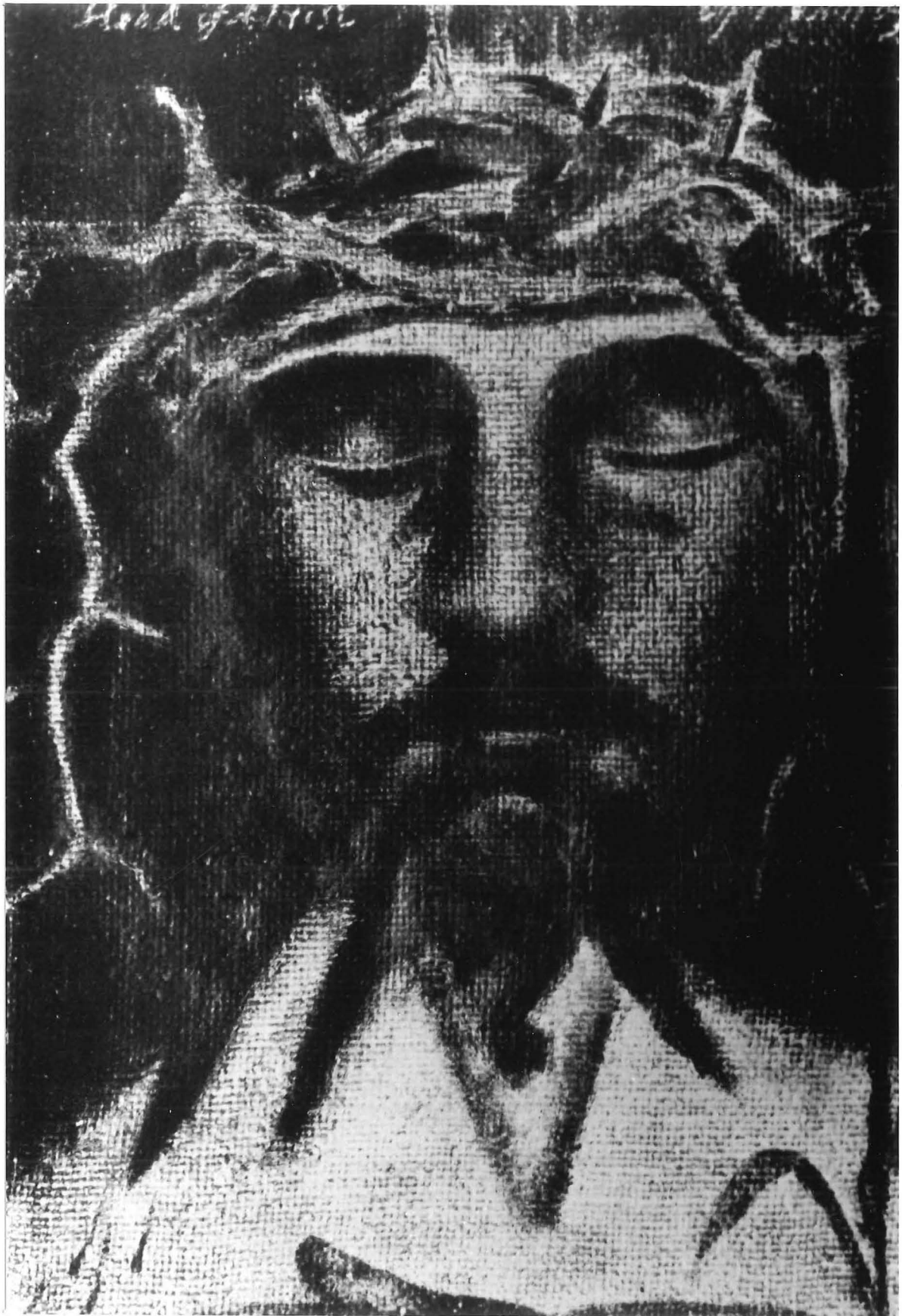
4. GIRL'S HEAD, 1962, OIL MONOTYPE ON PAPER, 600 x 500, PRIVATE COLLECTION



5. SAD MAORI, 1962, OIL MONOTYPE ON PAPER, 600 x 500, PRIVATE COLLECTION



6. TAKAUMU, 1963, CHARCOAL ON PAPER, 1040 x 835, CANTERBURY SOCIETY OF ARTS COLLECTION,  
ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH

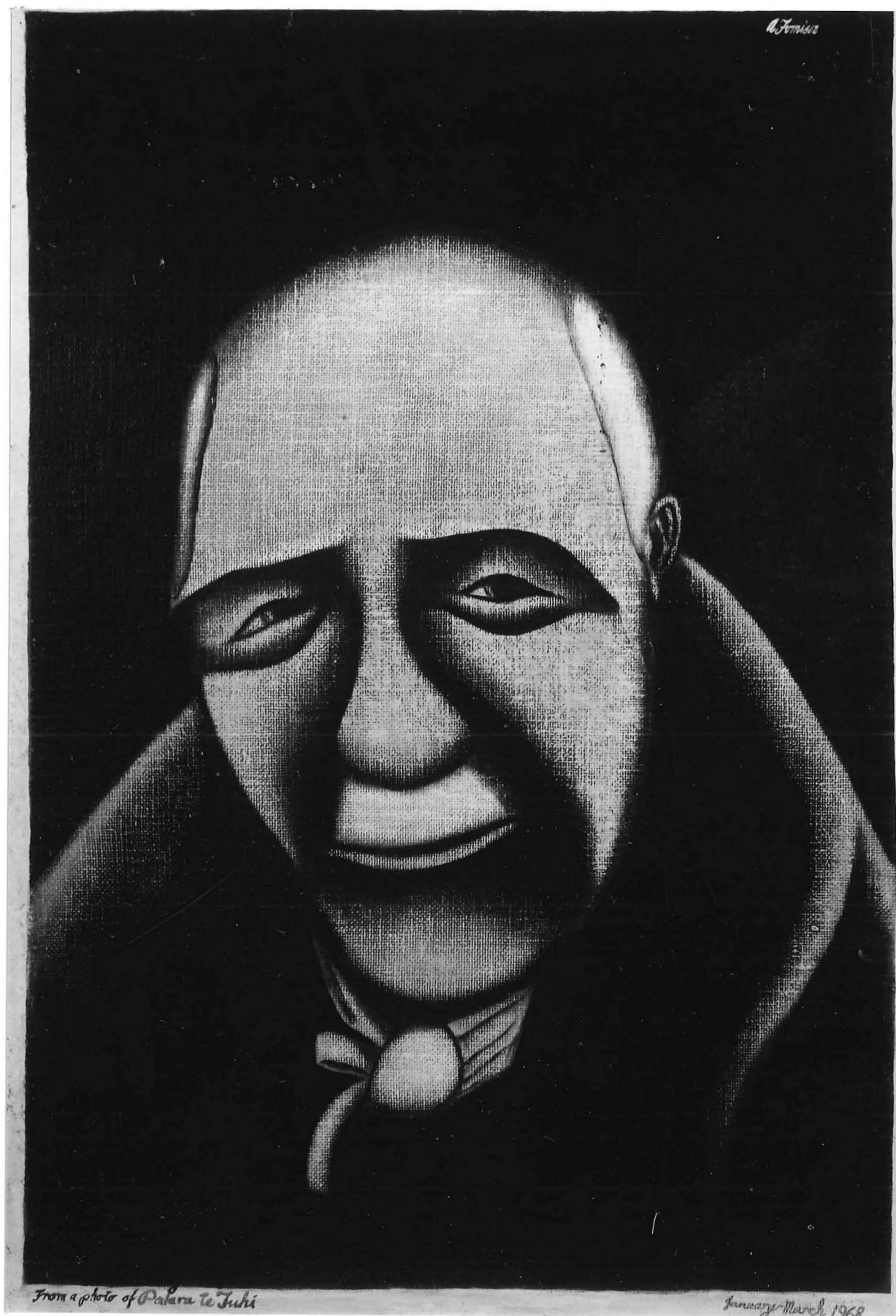


7. HEAD OF CHRIST BY MORALES, 1966, OIL ON HESSIAN, 335 x 240, PRIVATE COLLECTION





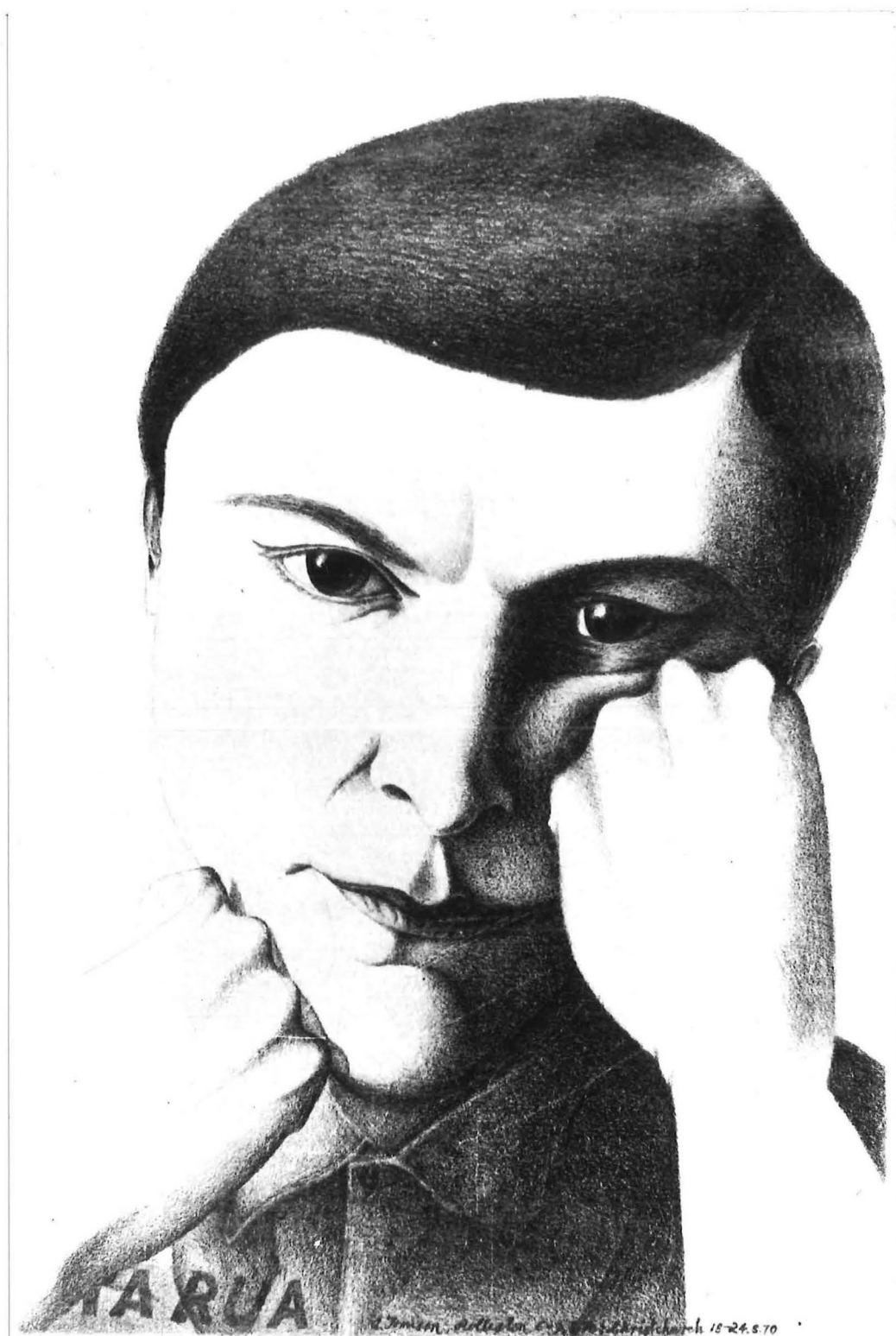
8. DOMINICO GHIRLANDAIO'S OLD MAN AND BOY, 1667, OIL ON HESSIAN ON HARDBOARD, 980 x 740, PRIVATE COLLECTION, ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH



9. FROM A PHOTO OF PATARA TE TUHI, 1968, OIL ON HESSIAN ON BOARD, 976 x 685  
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY COLLECTION, PRESENTED BY MARC AND NICOLE RANDS IN MEMORY OF THEIR FATHER, RICHARD RANDS, 1988

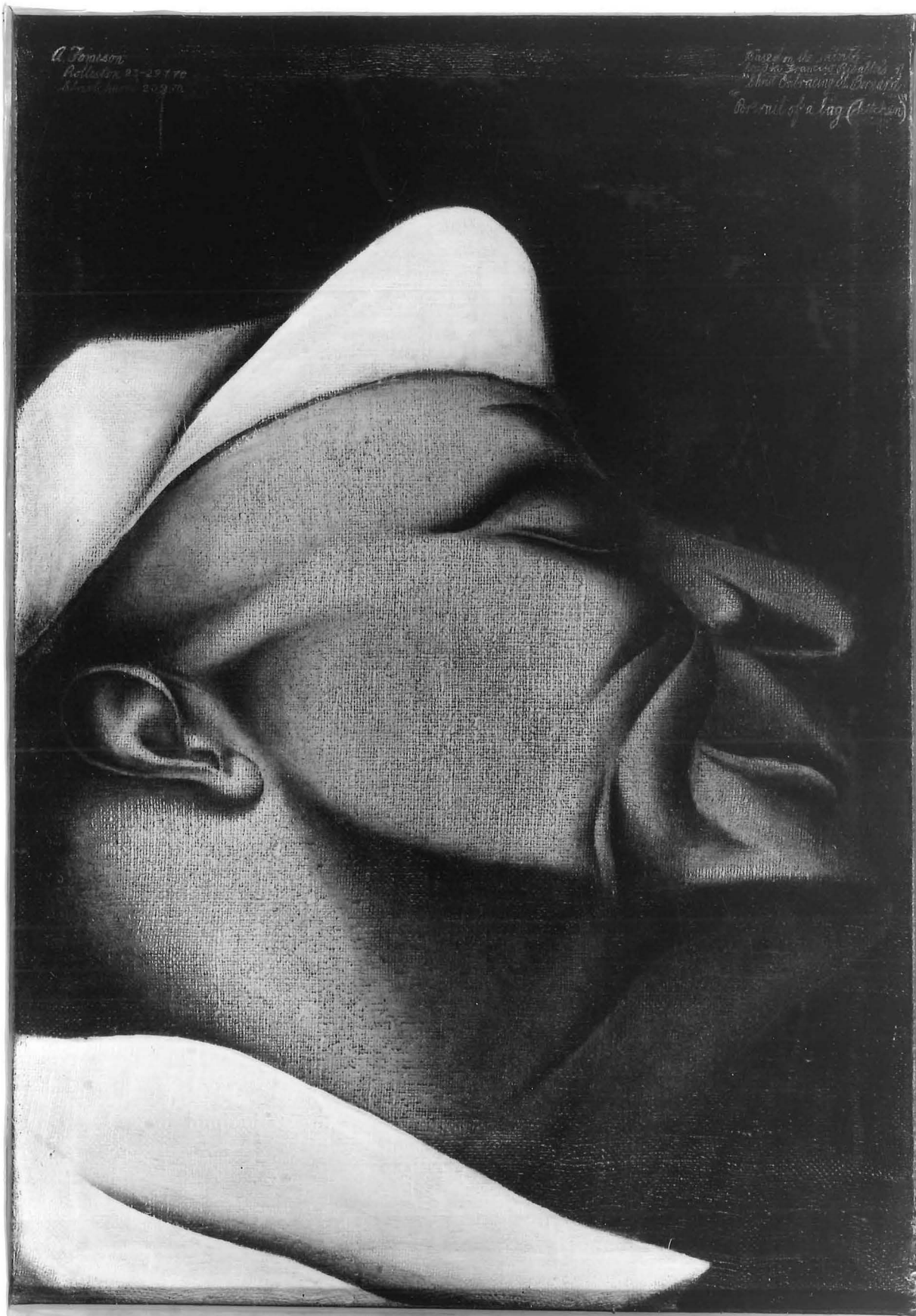


10. No!, 1969-71, OIL ON CANVAS, 1740 x 1790, ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH

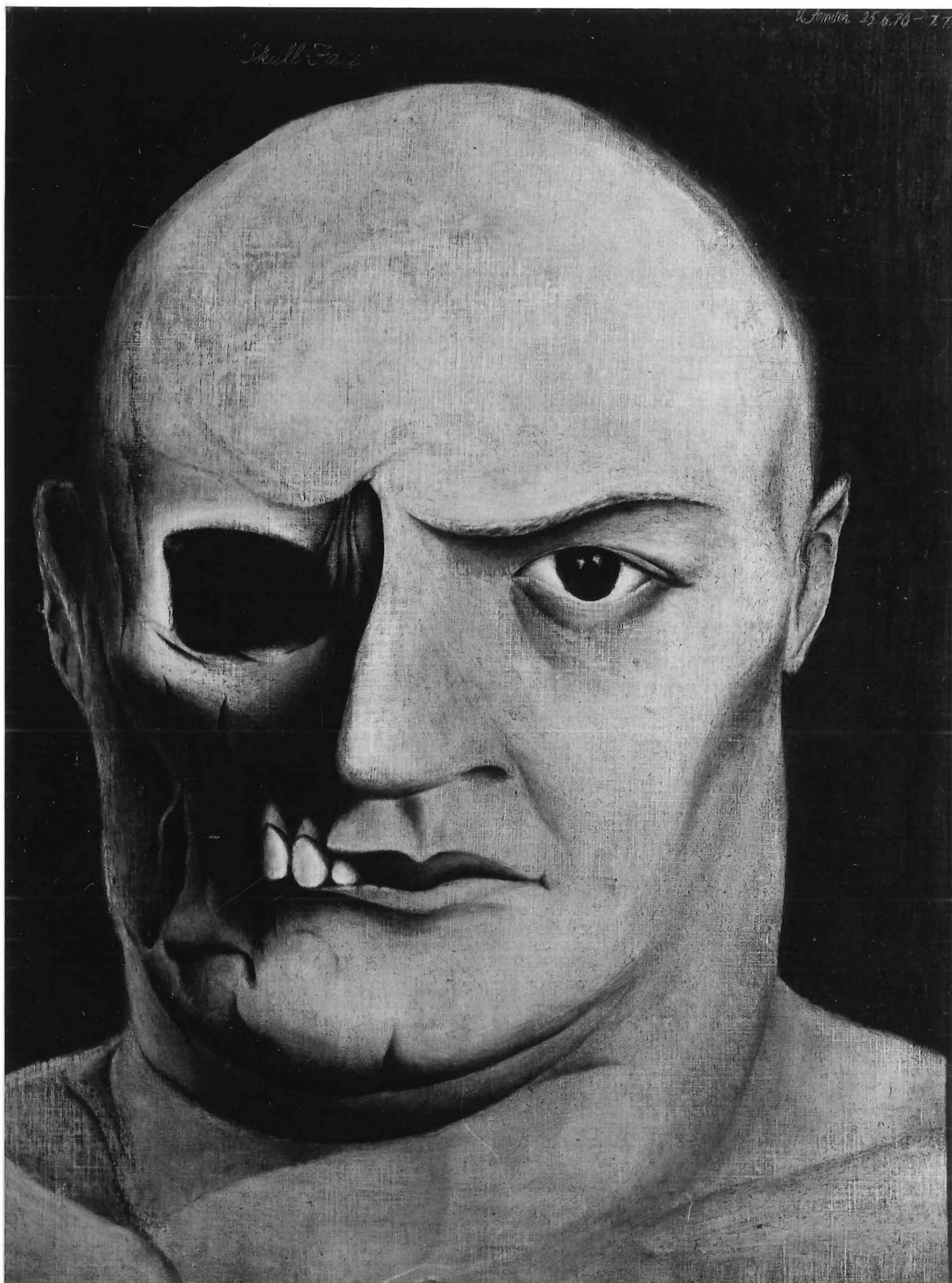


11. PAPARUA, 1970, (1970), PENCIL DRAWING, 305 x 210, ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH

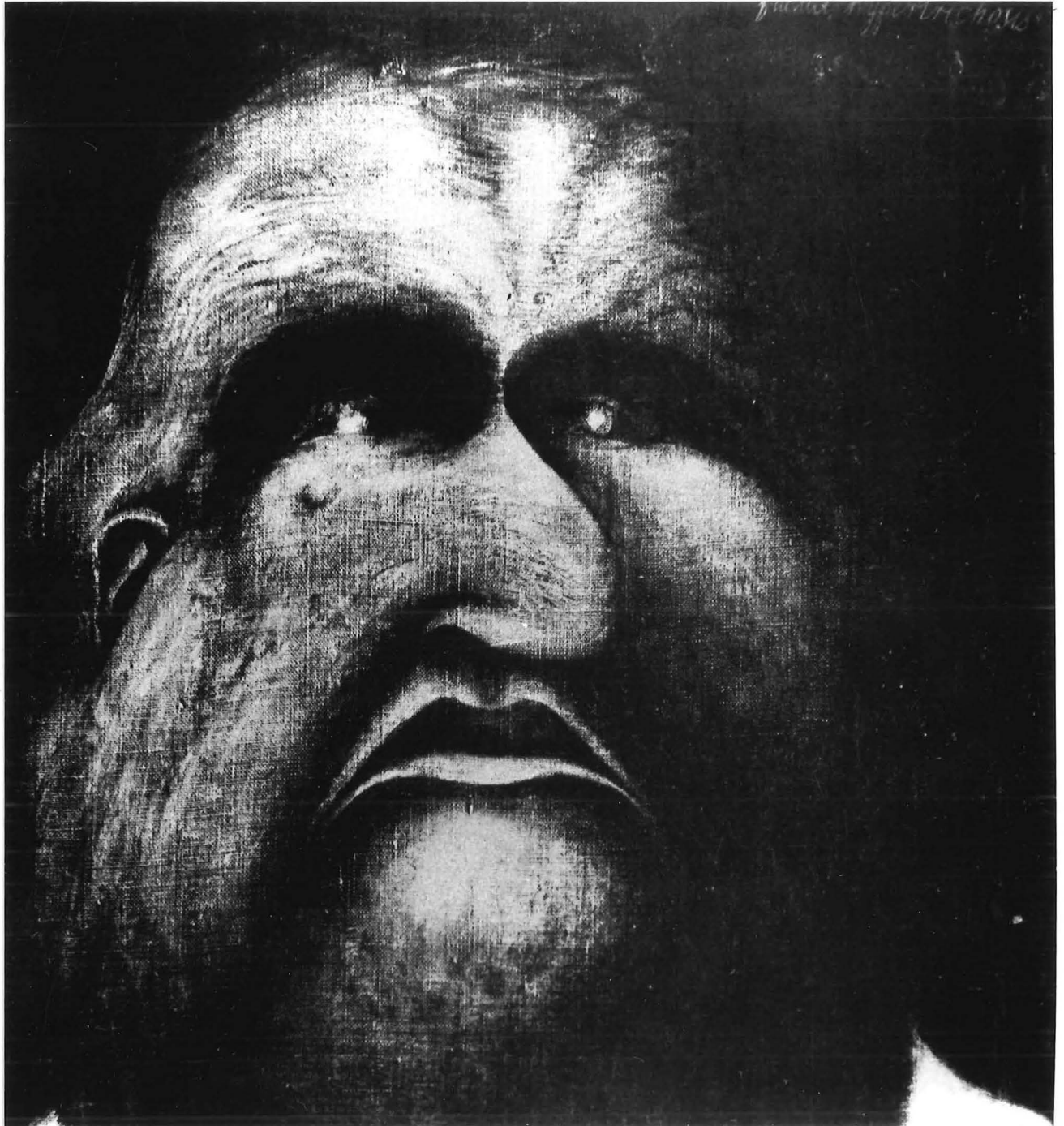




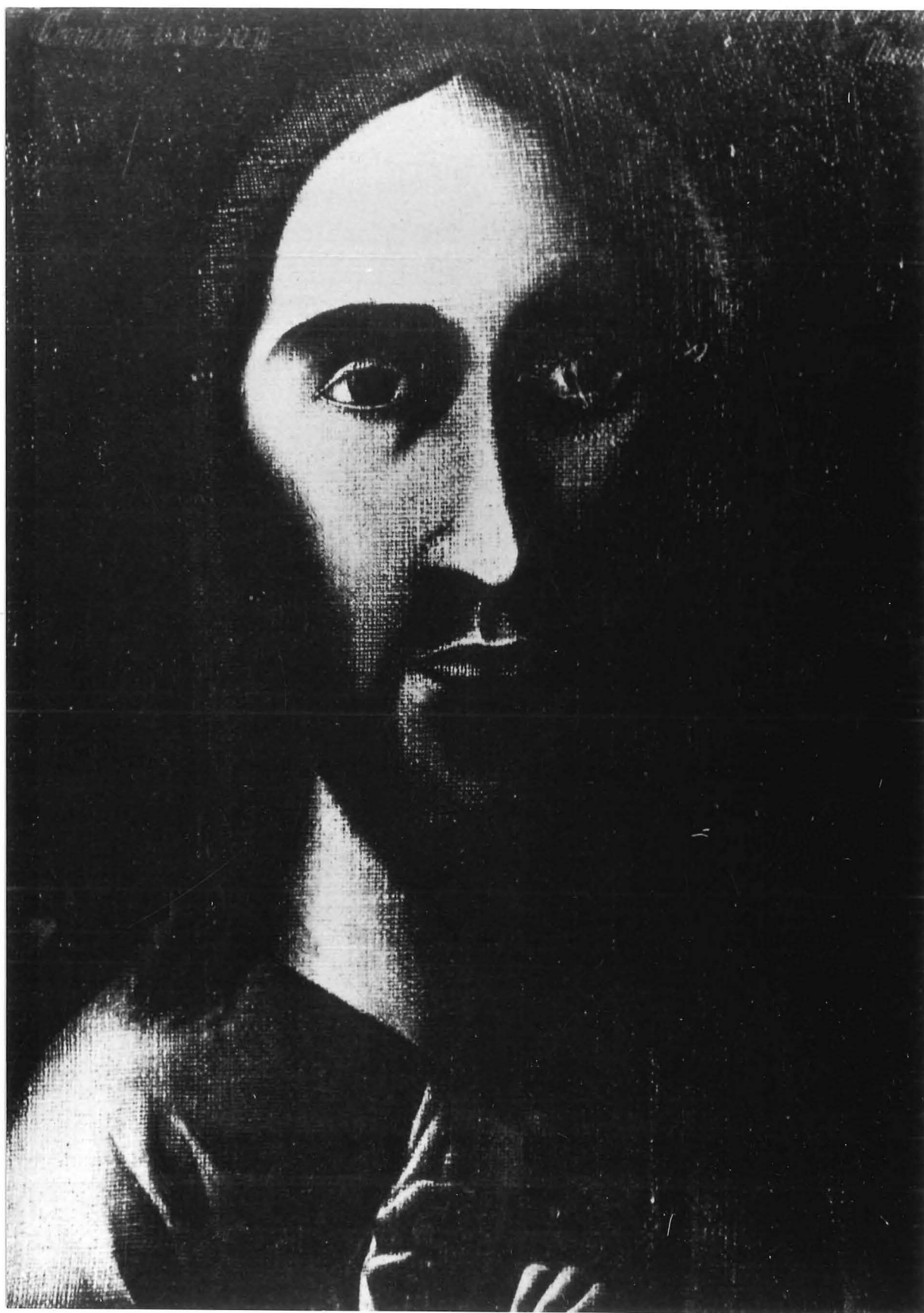
12. PORTRAIT OF A LAG, KITCHEN, 1970, OIL ON HESSIAN, 918 x 640,  
NATIONAL ART GALLERY, WELLINGTON



13. SKULL FACE, 1970, OIL ON CANVAS ON BOARD, 720 x 550,  
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY COLLECTION, PURCHASED 1983

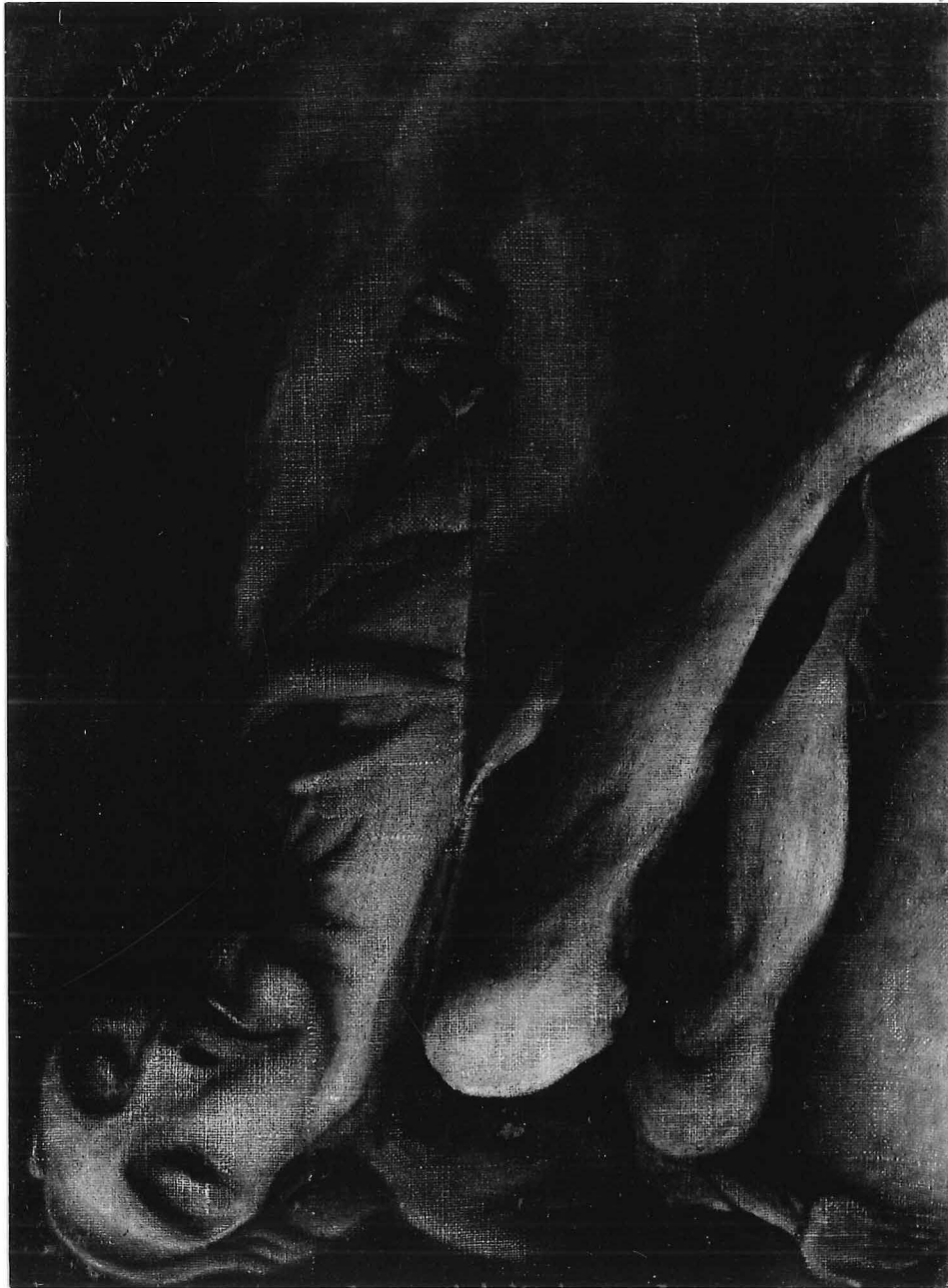


14. HAIRY MAN OF MANDALAY (A.K.A. FACIAL HYPERTRICHOSIS), 1970, OIL ON CANVAS, 293 x 275,  
PRIVATE COLLECTION



15. COPY OF ANTONELLO DA MESSINA'S "SALVATOR MUNDI", 1970, 705 x 540, OIL ON CANVAS,  
PRIVATE COLLECTION





16. DYING BEGGAR BY CERUTI. NO. 2, 1970-71, OIL ON HESSIAN, 773 x 1050,  
DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



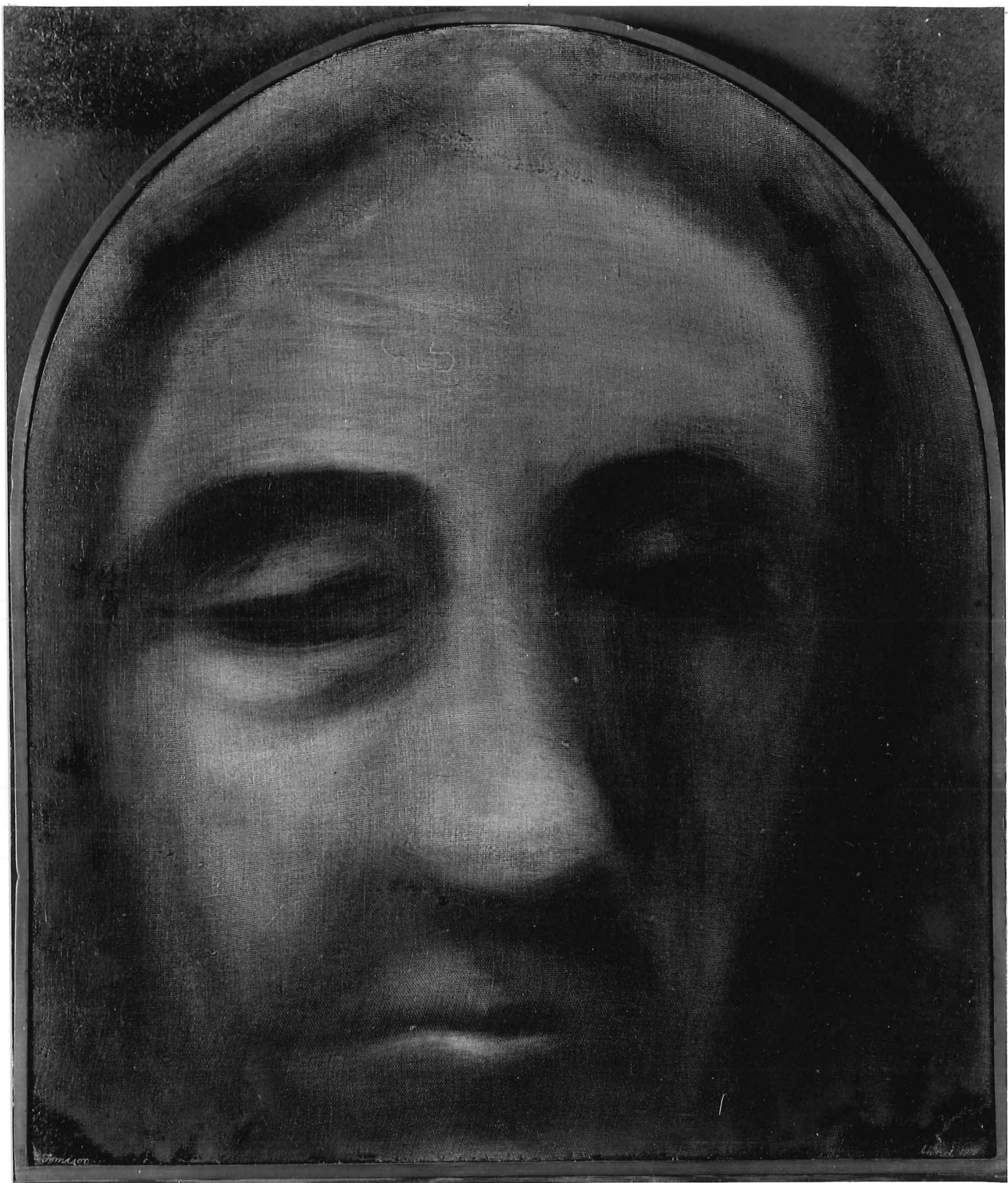
17. MUGSHOT, 1971, OIL ON HESSIAN, 605 x 913, DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



18. PAINTED EXTERIOR DECORATION, 9 BEVERIDGE STREET, CHRISTCHURCH, c. 1970  
PHOTOGRAPH PAUL JOHNS



19. FOMISON WITH PAUL JOHNS, c. 1973  
PHOTOGRAPH PAUL JOHNS

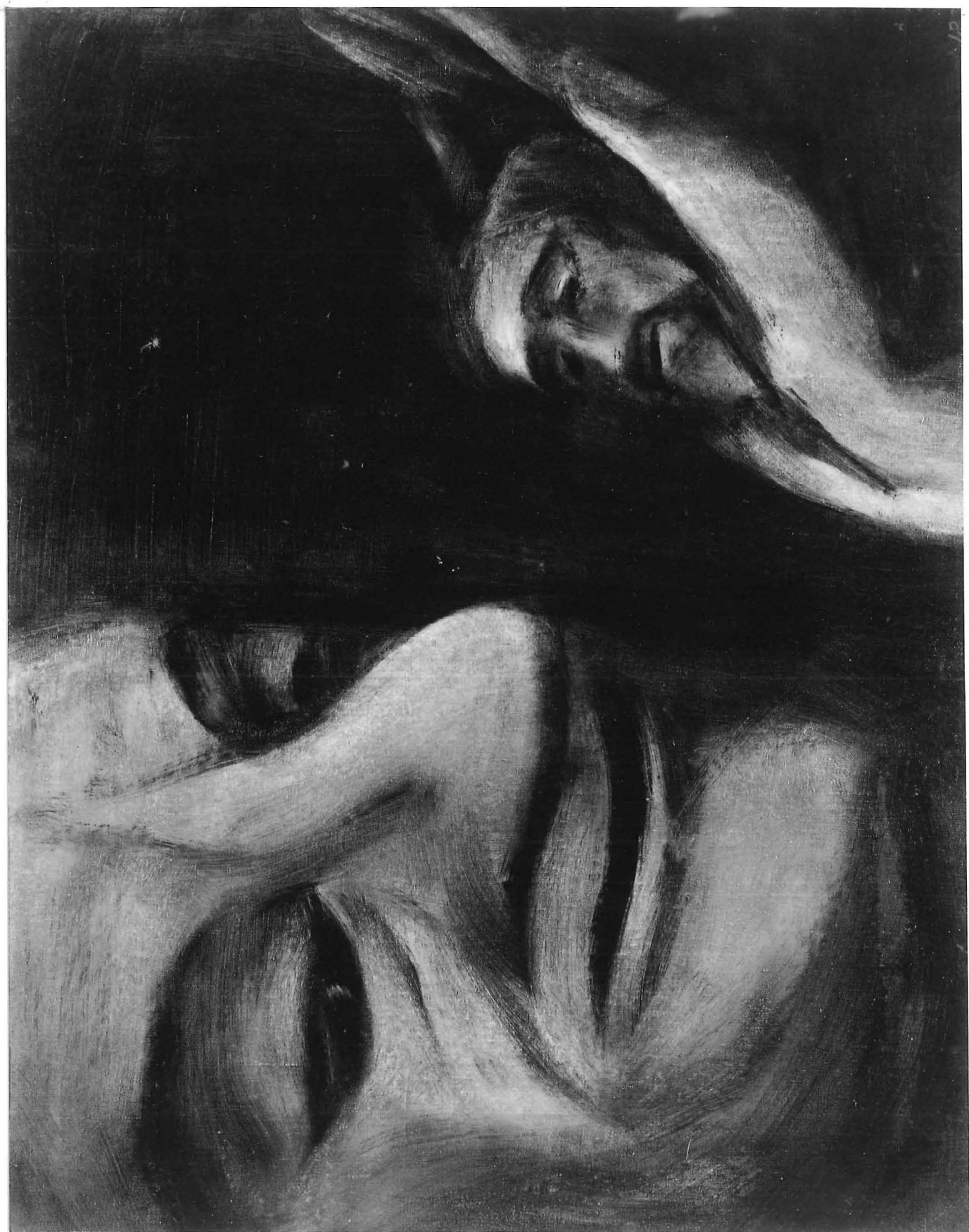


20. CHRIST, 1976, OIL ON CANVAS, 535 x 455  
NATIONAL ART GALLERY, WELLINGTON, PURCHASED 1972, THE ELLEN EAMES COLLECTION





21. HEY, MOON DREAMER, 1976, OIL ON HESSIAN, 330 x 505  
HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN



22. THE END IN HAND, 1976, OIL ON CANVAS ON BOARD, 613 x 768, DUNEDIN PUBLIC ART GALLERY



23. THE JESTER, 1977, OIL ON CANVAS ON WOOD, 555 x 679,  
ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH

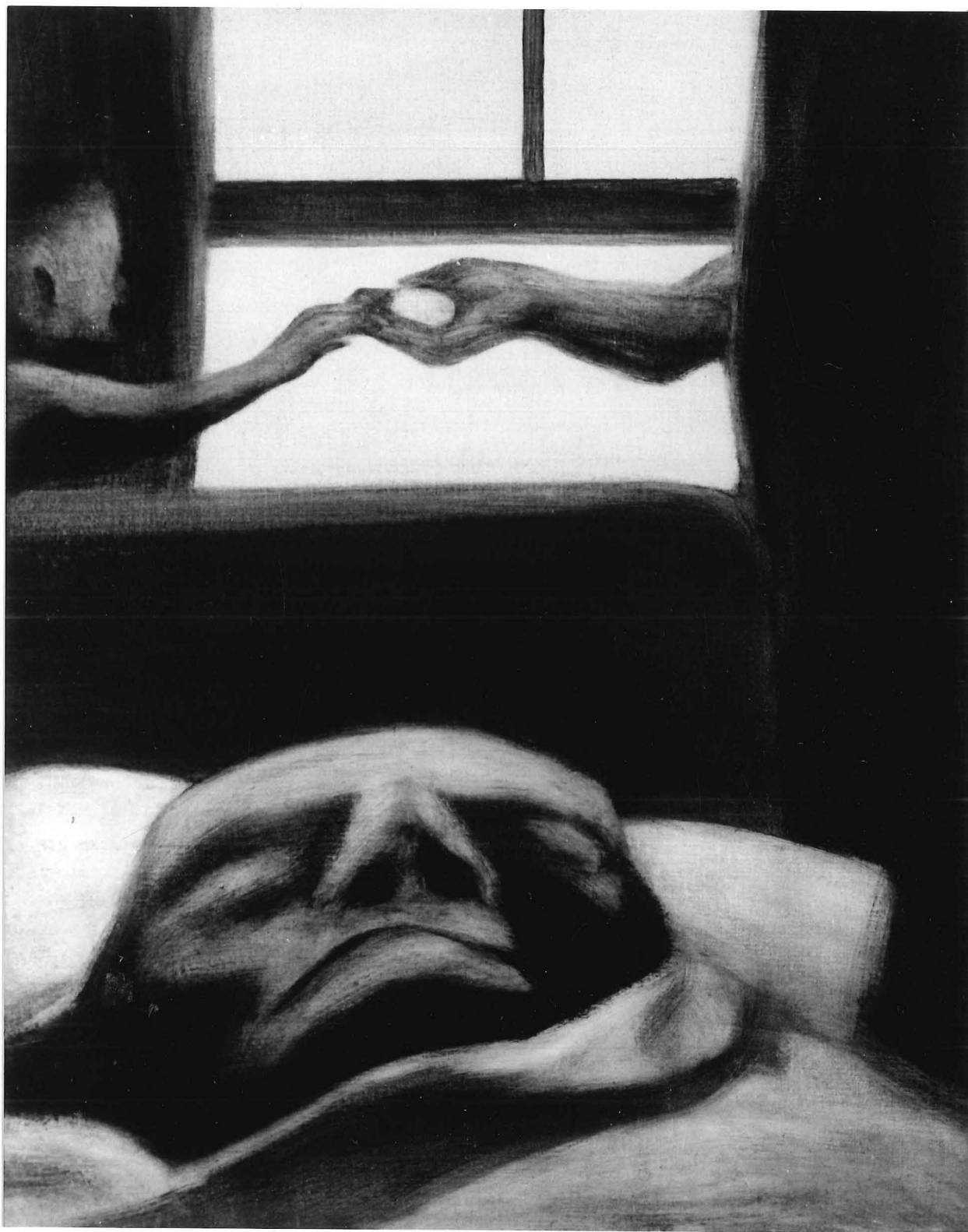


24. SELF PORTRAIT, c. 1978, OIL ON BOARD, 580 x 850  
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY COLLECTION, PURCHASED 1978





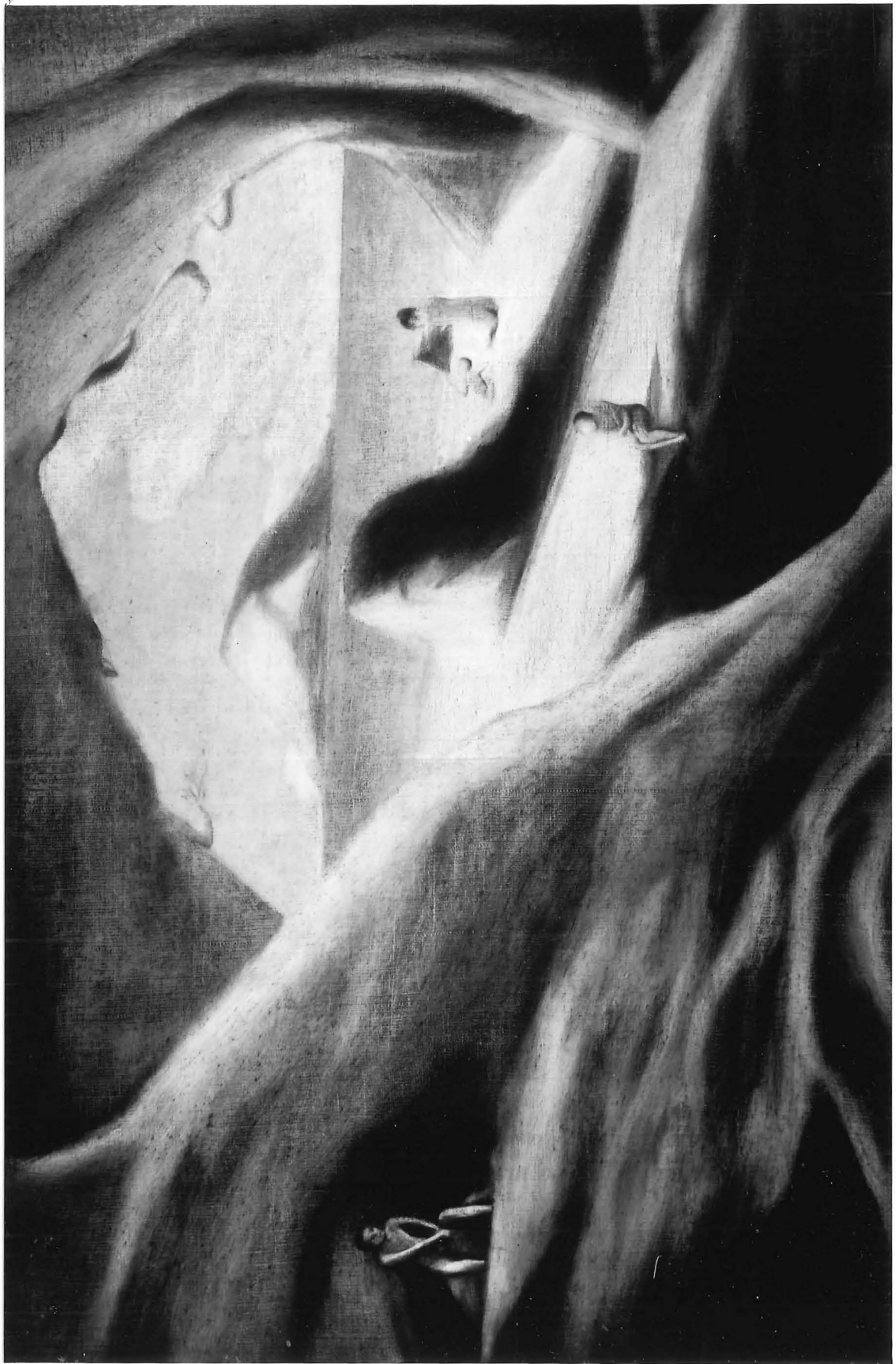
25. UNTITLED No. 208, 1978, OIL ON CANVAS, 395 x 305, PRIVATE COLLECTION



26. IS THE BAD ONE DEAD, 1978, OIL ON LINEN ON HARDBOARD, 760 x 605,  
GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY, NEW PLYMOUTH

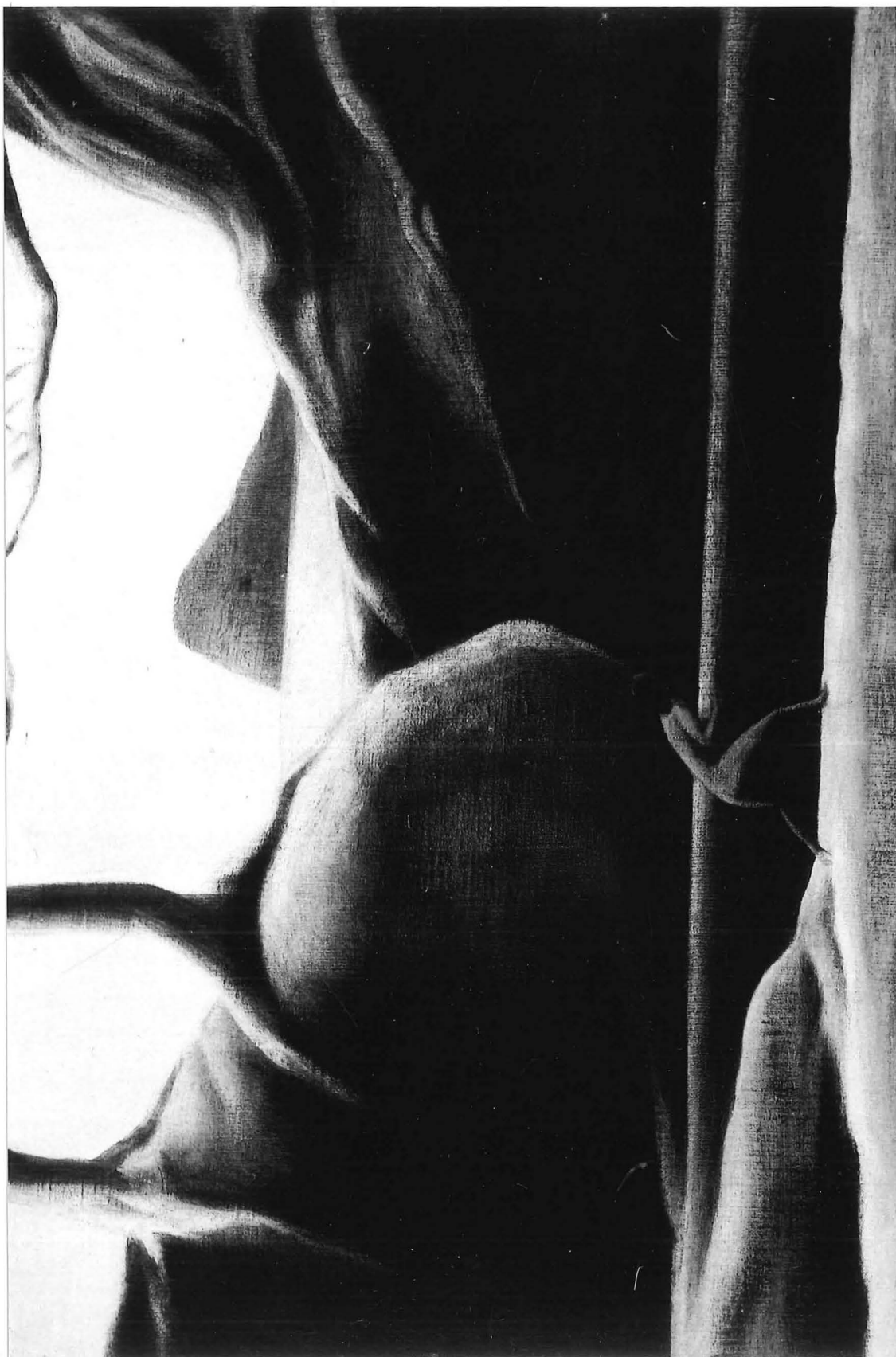


27. THE MAN OF PEACE AND THE MAN OF WAR (TE WHITI AND TITOKOWARU), 1980  
OIL ON CANVAS BOARD, 204 x 255, GOVETT-BREWSTER ART GALLERY, NEW PLYMOUTH

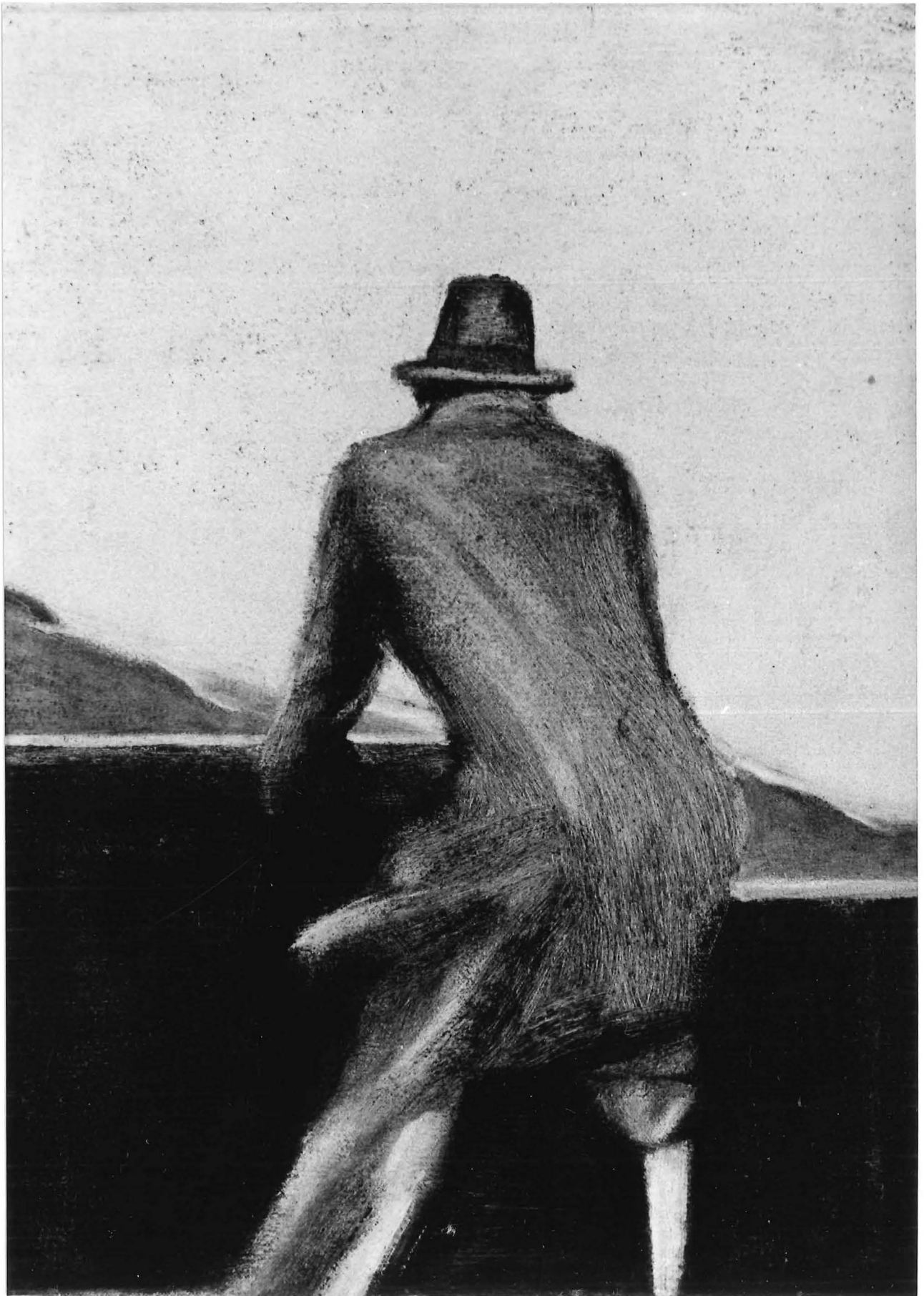


28. NOT JUST A PICNIC, 1980-82, EPOXY ON HESSIAN ON PINEX, 1210 x 1800  
AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY COLLECTION, PRESENTED BY THE FRIENDS OF THE AUCKLAND CITY ART GALLERY, 1982

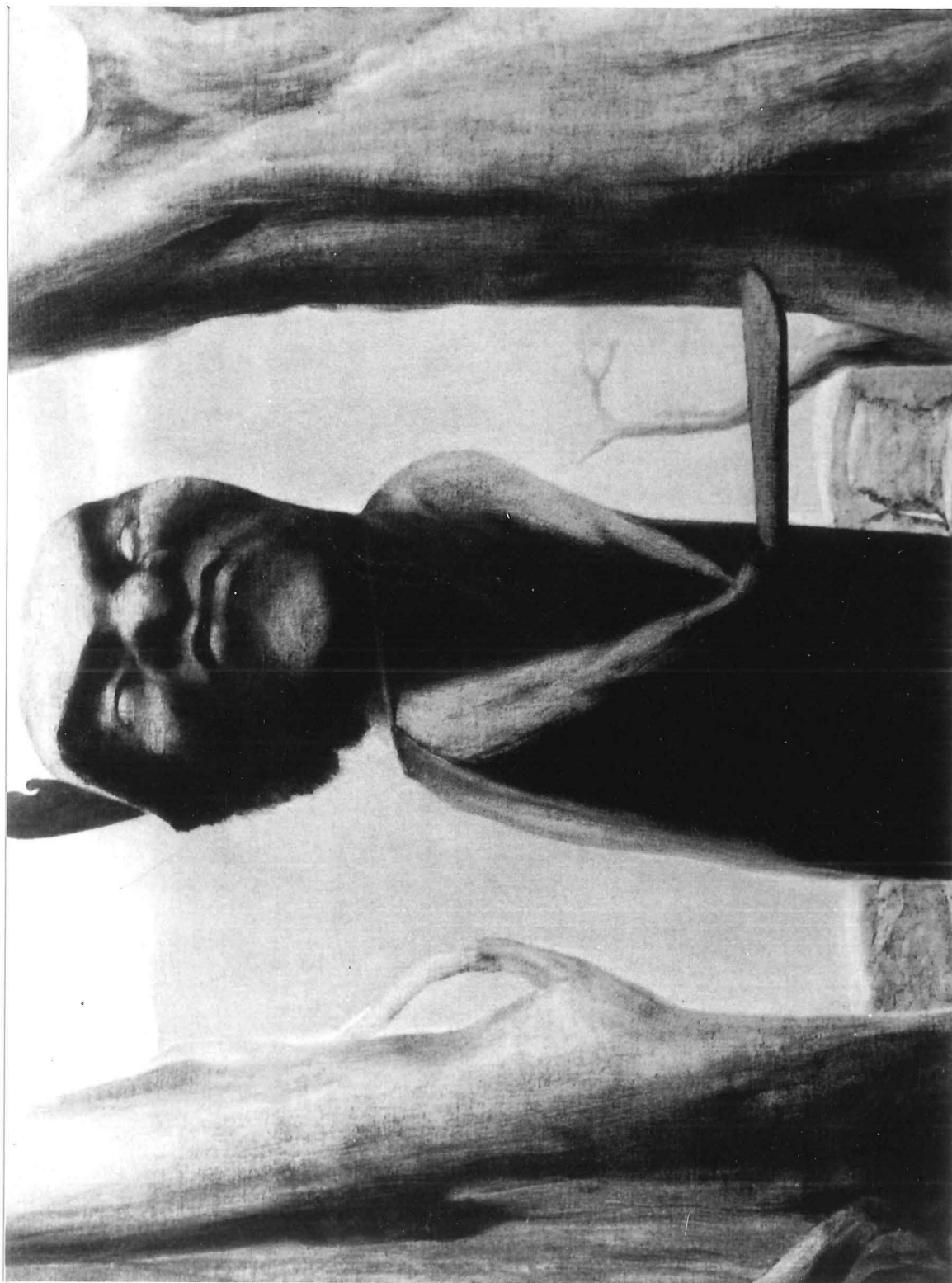




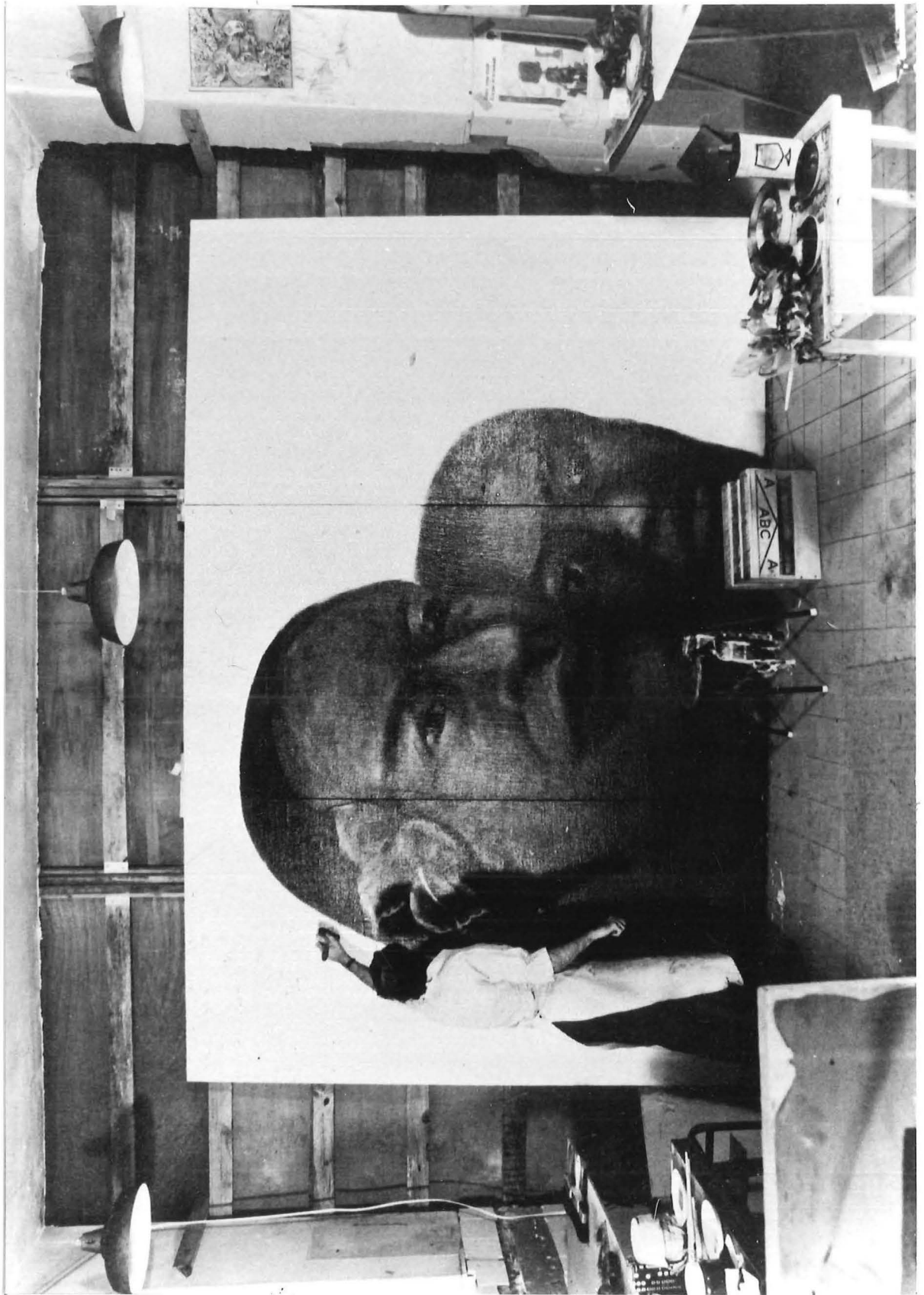
29. THE FUGITIVE, 1980-82, RESIN ON HESSIAN ON BOARD, 1220 x 1830  
BNZ COLLECTION, WELLINGTON



30. CAPTAIN AHAB PEG LEGGED HUNTER OF THE WHITE WHALE, 1981, OIL ON CANVAS BOARD,  
365 x 255, ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH



31. NGA TOKI MATE WHENUA: AXES FELLING TREES, KILL THE LAND, 1983, OIL ON CANVAS, 1010 x 760, CHARTWELL COLLECTION, HAMILTON

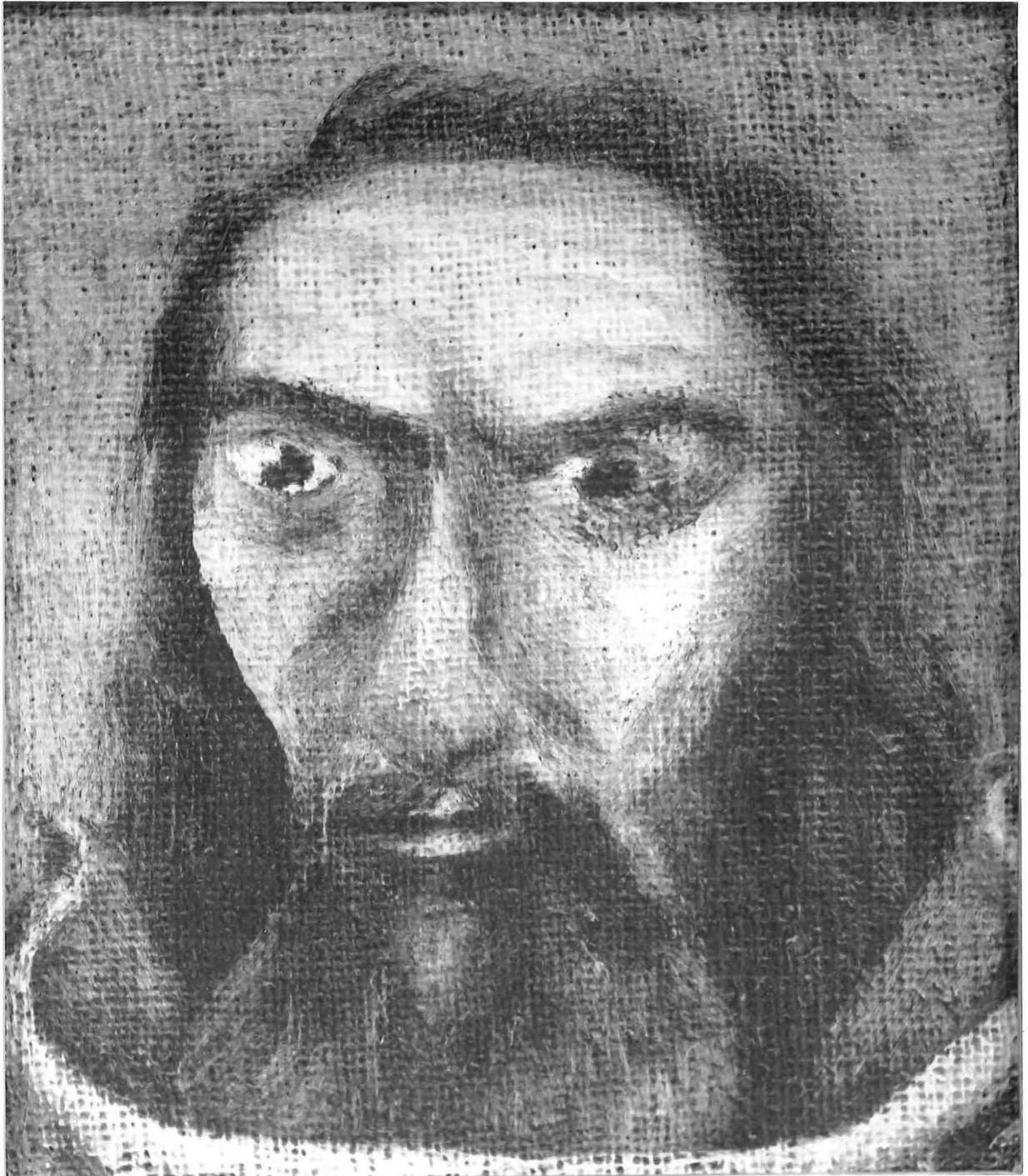


32. FOMISON WORKING ON **MOTHER AND CHILD (THE PONSONBY MADONNA)**,  
ST PAUL'S COLLEGE, AUCKLAND, 1983

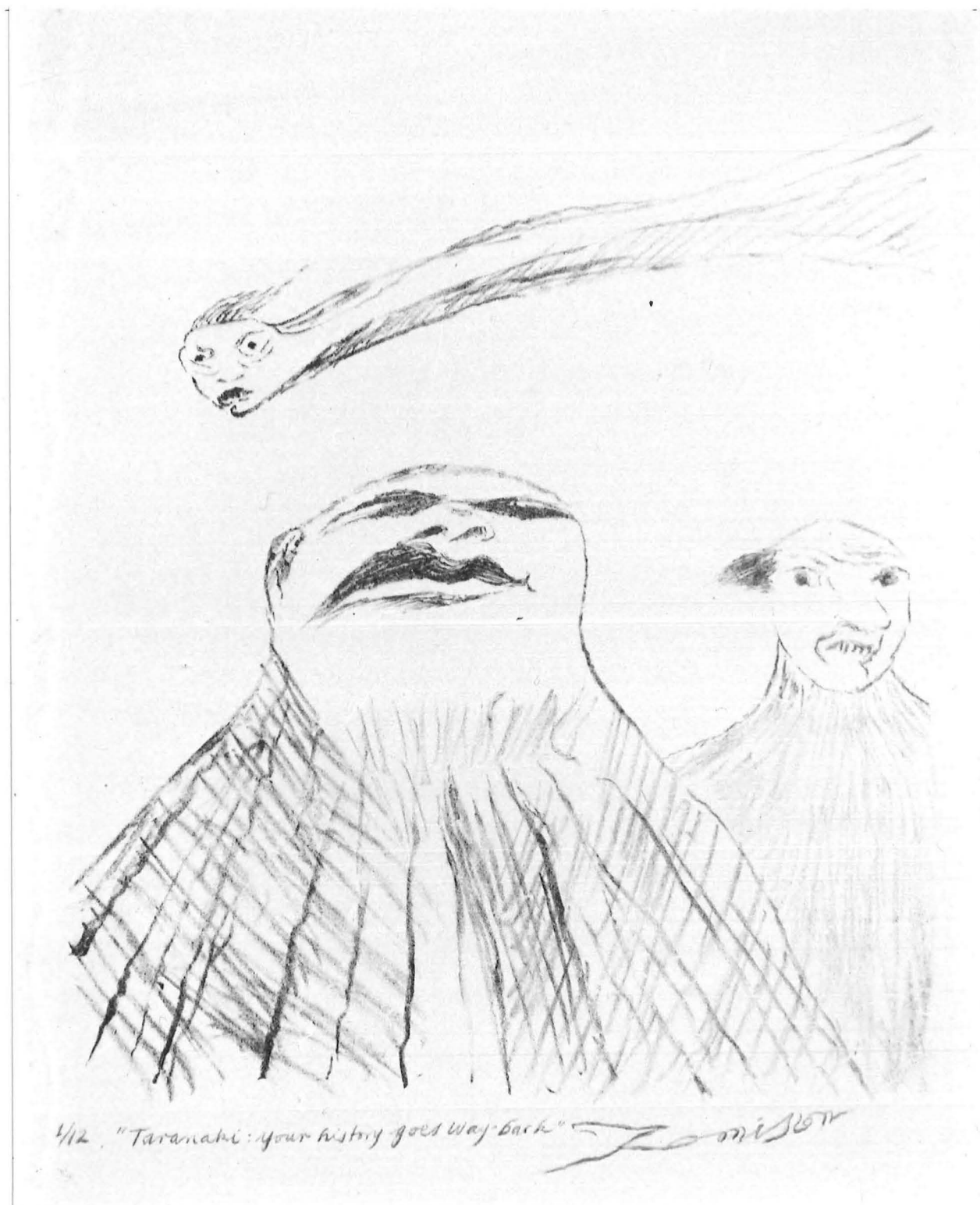


33. CERAMIC, c. 1983





34. "DON QUIXOTE" FINISHED OFF WITH PHIL CLAIRMONT IN MIND, 1984  
ACRYLIC ON HESSIAN STAPLED TO COMPOSITION BOARD, HOCKEN LIBRARY, UNIVERSITY OF OTAGO, DUNEDIN  
(PURCHASED WITH THE ASSISTANCE OF THE QUEEN ELIZABETH II ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND)



35. TARANAKI: YOUR HISTORY GOES WAY BACK, 1985, LITHOGRAPH (1/12), 470 x 330,  
ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH



2/14

*Based on Ghirlandaio's "Old Man & his Grandson"*

*Forsyth '86*

36. BASED ON GHIRLANDAIO'S "OLD MAN AND HIS GRANDSON", 1986, LITHOGRAPH (2/14),  
382 x 570, ROBERT McDOUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH





10/13

*Tarawera Eruption*

*Johnstone '86*

37. TARAWERA ERUPTION, 1986, LITHOGRAPH (10/13), 380 x 562,  
ROBERT MCDUGALL ART GALLERY, CHRISTCHURCH



38. MANTELPIECE, 90 WILLIAMSON AVENUE, AUCKLAND, 1989  
 PHOTOGRAPH ROBIN NEATE



39. SHELF, 90 WILLIAMSON AVENUE, AUCKLAND, 1989. ABOVE IS HEAD OF CHRIST BY MORALES, 1966  
 PHOTOGRAPH ROBIN NEATE



40. QUESTION AND ANSWER: THE TREE OF LIFE, 1989, OIL ON HESSIAN ON BOARD, 1220 x 1832,  
PRIVATE COLLECTION